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DURGA-DAS, THE RAHTORE

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DURGA-DAS, THE RAHTORE.

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CHAPTER I.

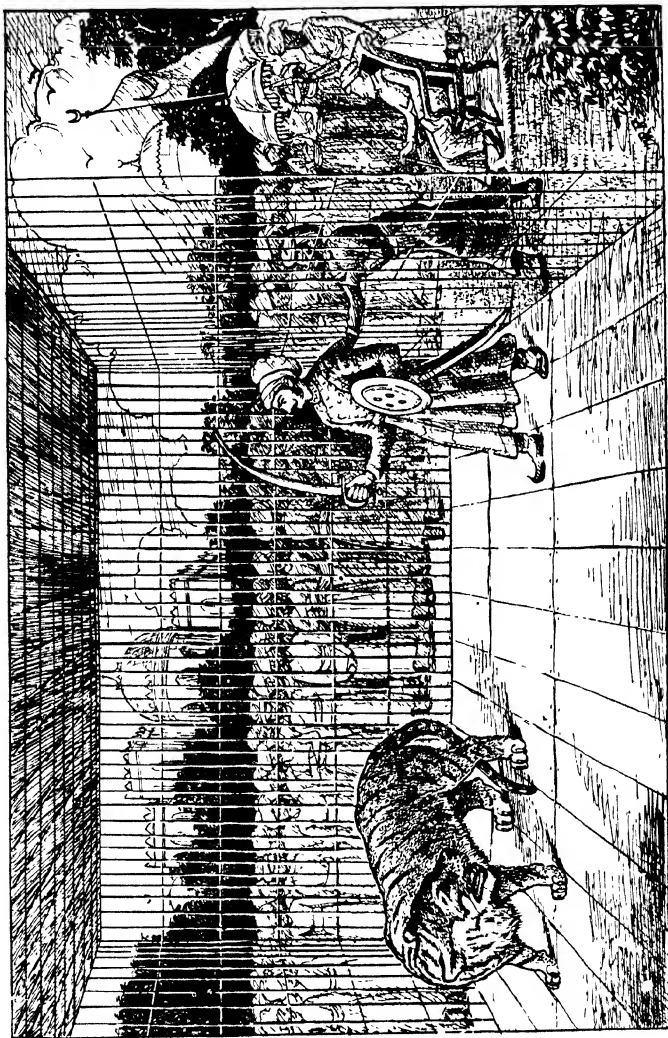
The Death of Jaswant.

The great Jaswant Singh of Marut-des or Marwar breathed his last at Kabul in 1681. Weary of living, worn out with grief, and with hardly a trace of his former energy and courage, Jaswant would willingly have resigned his life to his Maker; his Master the Emperor need not have put himself to the trouble of taking it by stratagem. But the Emperor was on thorns as long as Jaswant lived, and there was nothing he desired more passionately than to bring about his death.

For more than twenty years the power of the Emperor had been defied by the proud Rajputs. A score of times during this period did he scheme and plot to kill the brave Jaswant, but the latter was surrounded day and night by a valiant band of his kinsmen, and their unwearied vigilance set at naught all the Emperor's devices. The prowess of one of his guards, Mokund Das, the Kumpawat, will illustrate the valour of the rest. Long years before, when both Jaswant and he were young, the Prince had gone out to meet a friend in the vicinity of a haunted well, known as Dhobi Bavadi. He was suddenly seized with faintness and fell senseless to the ground. His followers rushed in, and the Purohit (the family priest) who was among them said that the Prince had fallen a victim to the spirit of the *tantrik* Brahmin who had died in that well years ago, and

that unless some one came forward and offered his own life to this spirit, the heir of Marwar had no chance of recovery. The men present hung their heads, for the dread of this powerful Brahmin spirit was great in all the country round, and none dared confront the fiend. At this moment Mokund Das arrived on the scene and when he learnt what was necessary in order to save the life of his young master, he turned to the Purohit and asked him to begin his exorcism. The priest thereupon sat down before a vessel of water and droned forth a long string of incantations. When this was finished, he took the vessel in his hands and waving it thrice in front of the undismayed Kumpawat, asked the warrior to drink the liquid to the last drop. Mokund Das cheerfully did so, and, to the surprise of all, the unconscious Jaswant awoke as from a pleasant sleep. When the Prince learnt what had taken place, he embraced his faithful kinsman, and ever after the two had been inseparable on their path through life.

As the result, perhaps, of his encounter with the spirit, Mokund Das was henceforward a changed man—changed in the sense that, always fearless, he now became utterly reckless, and none dared to incur his ire, with the sole exception of his friend and master. On one occasion the Emperor sent him a message through one of his courtiers, and Mokund Das, thinking that the wording lacked courtesy, sent back an insulting reply. This enraged Aurangzebe, and as a punishment, Mokund was condemned to fight for his life, if he dared, with a huge tiger, into whose cage he was thrust. Without the least hesitation he approached



MOKUND APPROACHED THE MONSTER BOLDLY.

the crouching monster boldly, taunting it with the words, "O Tiger of the Emperor, face now the Tiger of Jaswant!" The chronicles state that so fierce was the visage of the Rajput with its bristling moustache and its bloodshot eyes, that the tiger lowered its gaze, relaxed its muscles, and, turning round, stalked back to the end of the cage. "Look ye!" cried Mokund Das, "The brute dare not face me, and it is against the creed of a Rajput to fight with one who turns tail." The whole audience, including the Emperor, burst into admiring shouts, and Aurangazebe not only pardoned him but pressed costly gifts upon him. In answer to Aurangazebe's question whether he had any children to inherit his prowess, the dauntless Mokund said, "Sire, how can we have children when you drive us away from our homes to the far lands beyond Attock?" From that date Mokund came to be known in the annals of his country as Nahur Khan, that is, the Tiger-Lord.

The presence of men such as these around Jaswant frustrated the Emperor's designs. At last a solution suggested itself to him, and he resolved to send this most formidable of his generals into exile in the inhospitable wastes of Afghanistan. It was in an evil hour that Jaswant left for Kabul. He left his eldest son, Prithvi Singh, behind him to rule Marwar, while his two other sons, six daughters, and all his wives, except the eldest, a Princess of the Champawats, followed him to Afghanistan. A few years later the Emperor summoned Prithvi Singh to Court, and after complimenting him on his bearing, which was so much like that of his father, he dismissed him to his quarters

with a costly robe as a present. The Prince had scarcely reached his tent when he was attacked with convulsions, and he died shortly after as the result of the poison with which the garment had been imbued. When this dreadful news reached Kabul it broke his great father's heart. Death also carried away in quick succession the other two sons of the grief-stricken head of the Rahtores. This rapid disappearance of Jaswant's heirs roused a new ambition in Aurangzebe, which was nothing less than the annexation of Jodhpur to the Empire, and to secure this end he had the bereaved Rajput hero put to death without delay, thus removing the sole remaining obstacle to his aims.

CHAPTER II.

The Birth of Ajit.

Jaswant's remains were cremated by the Rahtores who had followed him from Marwar, and the two devoted queens who had followed him into exile were prepared to cast themselves into the flames of his funeral pyre. One of them, however, was soon to become a mother, and all the Rahtores, with Udaya Singh the Kumpawat at their head, prevailed on her to spare herself in the interests of what might prove to be a male heir to carry on the fame of Jaswant. The other queen and a number of ladies of the harem ascended the pyre and mingled their ashes with those of their lord. The rest of the household then set out on their long march back to Marwar. The party comprised two hundred and fifty Rahtores, the pick of the Rajput chivalry that had fought under Jaswant, besides his Queen, his daughters, and a select band of camp-followers. Travelling by easy stages so as not to weary the Queen, and stopping to rest every few days, the cavalcade at last reached Delhi, and there, in due time, to the unbounded delight of all the Rahtores, the Queen was safely delivered of a son.

The Emperor was camping at Agra at the time, and when the news reached him that one of Jaswant's queens had given birth to a male child, the consuming hatred towards the Rajput hero and his house which had so recently been appeased burst forth once more. However, being skilled in concealing his feelings, he summoned to his presence one

of his Civil Officers, and commanded him to carry to Delhi suitable presents for both mother and child, and also a *takced* to the leader of the Queen's retinue ordering the Queen and her son to be handed over to the care of the Governor of Delhi. The officer was to convey verbally to this leader and his associates the Emperor's promise to settle large estates on them, in addition to military pensions on a generous scale, if only they arranged the transfer without any hitch. The envoy reached Delhi in course of time, and after presenting the gifts from the Padishah to the Queen, he went to confer with Durga-Das, the leader of the Rahtore party, and a few of his friends. He handed the *takced* over to Durga and, allowing time for its contents to be noted, broached gently the nature of the inducements held out by the suzerain to the gallant general and his men. He wound up by adding that if they opposed the Emperor's wishes, the garrison in the city had received orders to surround and disarm them. "But", continued the envoy, "I am sure you will all readily see the wisdom and generosity that prompt our noble Emperor in his dealings with you. All Rajasthan, with the single exception of Mewar, is in his grip. To be homeless and landless is in no wise pleasant for a Rajput, much less for a Rahtore."

Consternation seized the minds of the faithful band on hearing these words, but then anger took the place of fear and the men seated beside Durga-Das sprang up with their hands on their swords. Their Chief, however, commanded them to remain calm, and turning to the envoy, he asked him to give them a few hours in which to consult the Queen

and others, and said that the Emperor's proposals would receive their anxious consideration. This assurance having been given, the officer from Agra withdrew to his camp, saying he would return in the evening.

He was barely out of earshot when the pent-up wrath of the warriors broke forth. Their shouts of rage and indignation brought the rest of the men on the scene; and when they understood what the relentless Emperor required of them, their fury knew no bounds. "Our lives are our country's, and we can defend it and its rightful heir as well!" they exclaimed as one man. "Let us swim," they cried, "in the ocean of battle! Let us root up our enemies, or, if they are too strong for us, let us enter the mansions of the brave!" Chandu the bard swore a great oath and said, "It is for a day like this that we enjoy our lands and wealth at the hands of our own Kings. Our bodies are the last bulwark of our homes, and if we must fall beneath the swords of the enemy we attain *Swarga* side by side. As for me, I have been our late Chief's friend and follower all these years, and this day I will show myself worthy of my salt. I will uphold the honour of my house and lead the fight in this day's slaughter that other bards may sing my praises in days to come!"

"Enough, brothers," cried Durga at this juncture. "Time presses. Already your noise has roused the envoy's suspicions. He has summoned the men of the garrison and you can see for yourselves that we are slowly being surrounded. The most important thing is to get the Queen and her babe away to a place of safety. Break up this

gathering quietly, and let us all disperse as though nothing was wrong. Meanwhile I will think out a way to save our precious charge."

During the two months that Durga-Das had spent in Delhi, he had had occasion to befriend a poor Moslem, a seller of sweetmeats in the streets of the city. He found him one evening beset by a turbulent mob of drunken soldiers who were teasing him unmercifully after having appropriated his basket and its contents. The Rahtore rushed into the throng, and made a couple of the men measure their length on the ground, and threatened to flay the rest alive if they stayed on the spot a minute more. His great stature, his lofty mien and his terrific blows all combined to put the drunkards to rout, and after they were gone, he consoled the poor man and told him to go home, saying that he would follow him to see that no one interfered with him.

It now struck Durga with the force of an inspiration that this poor sweetmeat seller, who always showed him the liveliest gratitude, could be induced to serve his present purpose, and he sent one of his men to bring the man before him at once. No sooner did he arrive than Durga-Das took him on one side, whispered a few instructions in his ear, and sent him off to equip himself for the part he had to play. In the meantime Durga hurried to the Queen and explained to her what he wished her to do. Shortly after, the sweetmeat-seller departed along the high road leading south out of the city, with his basket slung on his back and his *gosha* trudging behind him covered from head to foot in a flowing *burkha*.

When Durga saw that the pair were safely out of danger, he returned to his impatient followers and told them to gather their belongings and to mount their steeds. But before commencing their flight and their fight, there was another most sacred task that had to be carried out. The *Raj-loc*, that is, the daughters of Jaswant and the wives of the Rahtore warriors, were asked to enter a room filled with gunpowder, and, at a signal from Joda Singh, the Champawat, fire was set to it, and the heroines escaped the clutches of their would-be defilers in a burst of thunder and smoke. The envoy, who was watching from a distance all that was going on, saw the Rahtores thus resort to the terrible *Johur*, and, knowing what would follow it, he commanded the Imperial troops to fall upon the Rajputs. Then commenced a slaughter unique in the annals of Rajput history. A bare two hundred and fifty Rajputs opposed a mighty horde of five thousand disciplined soldiery thirsting for their blood! With hoarse cries of "Har, Har, Mahadeo," the Rahtores fought their way through the streets, parrying, thrusting and slashing, killing and being killed, till at night-fall, having reached the confines of the city, the handful that had survived the carnage in spite of having courted death managed to thunder away into the darkness, led by the heroic Durga. Long before it was dawn the exhausted knights reached the spot where their captain had instructed the sweetmeat-seller to halt with the Queen. To their infinite relief, they found the good man sitting outside a village shrine at a short distance from the Queen with the baby at her breast. The faithful hawker had carried the

child concealed in his basket till it was a long way out of danger, and then had handed it over to its devoutly thankful royal mother.

It was easy now for Durga-Das to convey mother and child in a hired palanquin to Mewar, of whose royal house the Princess was a member. The great Rana Raj Singh of Mewar welcomed his unfortunate kinswoman with the utmost cordiality, and expressed his unstinted admiration for the gallant Rahtore whose loyalty to his master remained undimmed even after the latter's death. The humble sweetmeat-seller, who had accompanied the party, also found a warm welcome at the hands of the Rana, and suitable arrangements were made for him to lead a life of ease wherever he chose to stay, whether in Mewar or back in his own Delhi. It is pleasant to record that when Ajit came of age and regained his Kingdom and throne, he eagerly sought out this good man, and settled a rich Jaghir at Jodhpur on him and his heirs.

The Rana assigned Kailwa at the foot of the Aravallis as the future home of Jaswant's Queen, and he gave Durga-Das entire liberty, to guard the child in any manner he pleased. This great son of Rajasthan, as wise as he was brave, counselled the Queen, after she reached Kailwa, to put the infant into his care without the least fear or distrust, for he had made arrangements to have it brought up in a retreat, the name of which would not be disclosed even to its mother lest the knowledge should be wormed out of her by the wily Emperor. The Queen, who was the wisest Rajaputni of her generation, saw the force of Durga-Das's argu-

ments, and without a word of protest she resigned into his hands the most precious possession she had in all the world. Grateful to her for the trust she placed in him, Durga conveyed the sacred burden, unknown to more than three of his followers, to the hallowed heights of Mount Abu or Arbuda, and there he laid it in the lap of a mysterious recluse, telling the holy man that it was the child of a kinsman of his, and that, as his enemies were pursuing him, he had come to lay the little thing at the feet of the Guruji.

CHAPTER III.

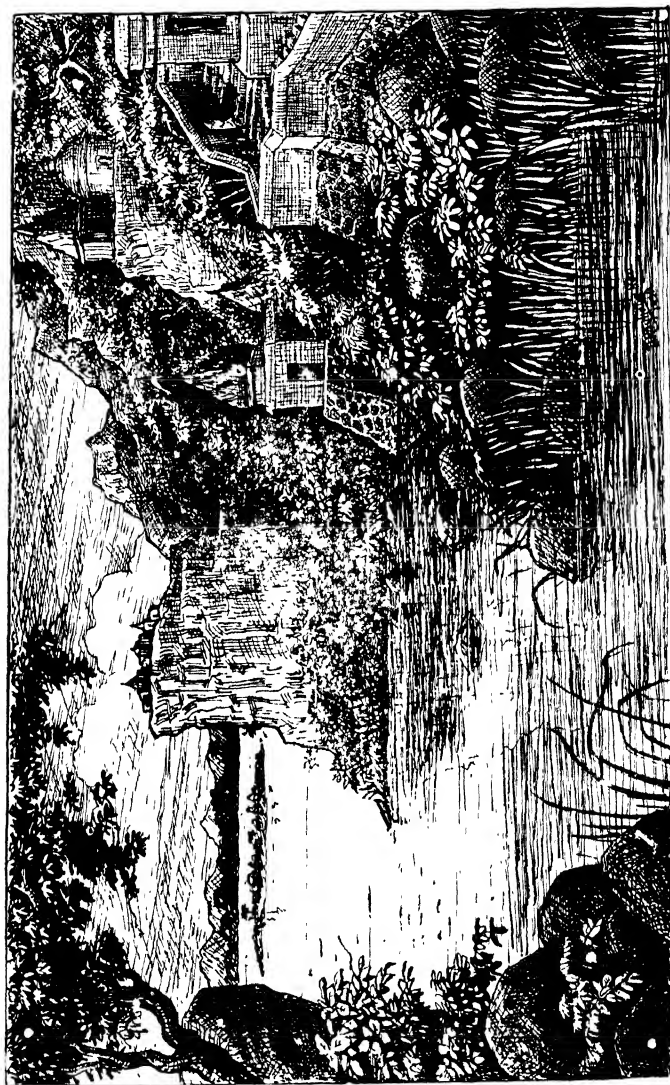
The Recluse of Mount Abu.

Passing his sinewy hands over the babe, the recluse looked steadily at Durga and smiled. This hermit was, as has been said, a mysterious being. In person he was tall, taller than the great Rahtore, though not so massive. The veins and muscles on his chest and long arms moved under the skin with the strength of sea-snakes. His broad forehead and piercing eyes, shadowed by shaggy eyebrows, suggested anything rather than a peaceful anchorite. Rumour had it that it was not rare for him to be found roaming the hills with a huge sword and a small buckler, and that these excursions were always connected with sudden onslaughts by someone unknown on ruffians bent on violence or pillage in the wild regions of the Aravallis. One such story was concerned with the recent rescue by an unknown of a sacred bull which a dozen Kolis were trying to drag to the slaughter. Not one of the marauders left the spot alive! Further, it was not easy to fix the creed the sage followed. There were those who said he was a Moslem Fakir, while others as stoutly maintained that he was a Hindu *Vana-prasth* of the Dattatreya sect. His appearance gave some ground for both these conjectures. A long gown of coarse wool enveloped him to the knees; it was sleeveless, exposing to view his mighty forearms, and he wore nothing beneath it. A string of amber beads encircled his neck. A copy

of the Koran was always in his right hand, and the words "Allah-O-Akbar" constantly on his lips. Nevertheless on his forehead could be seen a thick band of sacred ashes such as Hindu ascetics wear, and from either ear swung a brace of steel hoops of the kind that the Bhils affect. It was whispered by some of the shepherds who grazed their flocks on these hills that often they heard the ascetic groaning aloud in some secret dell with the oft-repeated names of both Allah and Mahadeva on his lips.

His usual abode was a huge dilapidated shrine of the Jains built on a spur on the Western slopes of Mount Abu, far removed from that part of the mountain on which rose the gorgeous fanes frequented by ceaseless hosts of pilgrims. This ruined building stood on a bare eminence only approachable by a narrow goat-track, and about six hundred feet below it lay a lake with thickly wooded sides and numerous rocky islets. It was known to a few that the hermit kept by the margin of this lake a light skiff on which he used to row over to one of these islets when the fancy took him.

The recluse, who was known as Madar Yogi (a curious compound quite in keeping with the rumours as to his creed), smiled and said, without taking his eyes off Durga-Das, "Since when has Durga-Das begun to think that I am one whom any man can deceive?" Without giving Durga time to reply, he continued, "I am nearly seventy years old, and I have known you for the past twenty years, since the time when, in the prime of youth, you forsook your home and its ties to follow Jaswant in his perilous enterprise



HIS USUAL ABODE WAS A HUGE DILAPIDATED SHRINE.

under the Padishah. You remember that I cautioned you, on the very first occasion when I met you, that the path Jaswant trod was not an honest one, and that no true Rajput should follow him in his devious ways. But let that be! You have just returned from beyond the Indus and have managed to save your Queen and her precious babe by the valour of your arms. Now you are separating mother and child, and have come to ask me to bring up the heir of the Rahtores unknown to the world. How can I who have renounced everything in life, even the very haunts of men, undertake to keep guard over so sacred and so delicate a charge? I know what is in your mind as regards the aid you are prepared to give me. Even so, do you not think that a lone ascetic is the last person on earth to be saddled with such a responsibility? Speak, then; what have you to say?"

"Guruji," said Durga-Das, folding his hands in salutation, "pardon me for forgetting even for a moment that you see clearly into all the three aspects of Time. My overwhelming anxiety to preserve this frail heir to all the greatness of the Rahtores deluded me into trying to impose upon your wisdom. Nowhere else in this wide Bharatavarsha is the child safe except with you. I have brought with me a trusted *Goli* (handmaid) of the Queen's, and the two Keechees, Shiv Singh and Mokund, have my orders to stay always in this *Ashram* and to obey you to the letter. Except these three, no one else, not even the child's mother or my brother and my son, knows what has become of Jaswant's heir. And till better times dawn for Rajwarra, I most

humbly pray of you to pour your blessings on this babe and preserve it from its foes. When it grows older, do not let it know of its rank and race. Grant me this prayer, O saintly one, and let your servant depart to draw his sword again, if it may be, in the service of our hapless Motherland! Hard times are before us, and even now I know not what machinations are brewing in the brain of the Emperor, that scourge of Rajasthan."

"Well spoken, my son," rejoined the Yogi, "Your two men and the *Goli* may take up their quarters here, but in one respect they must obey me implicitly. None of them must come out of their quarters during the day time, nor may they at any time have speech with me. I foresee trouble, but it will be my task to watch and to seek their help if necessary. Now go, and may Allah's blessings be on your head."

Durga bowed, drew his men apart, whispered his instructions to them, and, taking a last long look at the baby, left the shrine and made his way down the mountain.

CHAPTER IV.

The Rana's Letter to Aurangzebe.

When Aurangzebe learnt of the escape of a handful of Rajputs headed by Durga-Das, he set his spies in motion to ascertain whether the Queen and her babe had accompanied them, and where they had finally settled. A month later, the men returned with the news that the party had ultimately reached Mewar, and that the Rahtores and their Queen had thrown themselves on Rana Raj Singh's protection. They added that they had been unable to discover in what part of Mewar they had now found refuge. Incensed beyond words, the Emperor wrote at once to the Rana commanding him to deliver the heir of Marwar into his hands immediately or dire destruction would fall on him and his. The gallant Rana sent back a courteous reply, saying that it was not a Rajput's *Dharma* to hand back to their enemies those unfortunates who sought asylum with him, and as for the Emperor's threat to punish him, he was at liberty to come to Mewar to carry it out at any time he pleased.

This defiant reply infuriated the Emperor, and he at once issued orders for a general invasion of Udaipur. Akbar was recalled from Bengal, another son, Azim, from Kabul, and some time later the eldest, Muazeem, was brought from his wars in the Deccan. Entering Mewar, the hosts of

Aurangazebe laid waste all the cities in the low country, Chittoor, Mandelgar, Mandasore and the rest. Temples were razed, sacred tanks defiled, all the cattle destroyed, in short, there was no atrocity left unperpetrated in that hapless country. Such of the inhabitants as escaped this awful slaughter fled to the highlands, taking with them whatever they could. The first shock over, Rana Raj Singh abandoned Udaipur, and himself repaired to the slopes of the Aravallis. His clarion call for aid from all who were loyal to the Rajput *Dharma* met with a wonderful response. Warriors came pouring in from all parts of both Jodhpur and Mewar, and even from distant Jessalmir. Even the hill tribes, who are at best of no caste, and live more or less on plunder, joined in the general rally to the crimson banner of the Rana, and posted themselves with bows and arrows at the head of every likely defile. The Rana divided his forces, deputing the gallant Durga-Das to hold the western flank, while his own two sons Jey Singh and Bhim Singh were detailed to hold the northern and southern passes. For himself, he took his station with a thousand men at Main Ghats above Udaipur. Dayal Singh, his Civil Minister, not to be denied his share in this life-and-death struggle, begged his King to make use of him, and he was asked to proceed to Malwa and raise contingents from all the ruling powers in that region. In all the armies thus raised by the Rana, the Rahtores claimed to occupy the front rank, for they pointed out that it was their Prince in whose defence the Sessodias had taken up arms, and they were therefore entitled to be the first to die.

Aurangzebe retaliated by despatching Inayet Khan to Marwar, and himself followed him, issuing commands to commit all the towns and villages to the flames and to raze temples and monasteries to the ground wherever they were found. Jodhpur, Nagore, and Mairtea were sacked, and while Inayet was told to occupy the capital, Indur Singh and his son Mukhya (son and grandson respectively of an elder brother of Jaswant) were given possession of the other two cities. Meanwhile tidings reached the Emperor that disaster had overtaken the arms of Azim, Akbar, and Dilir Khan in their fight with Mewar, and he detached Dabir Khan to join forces with Prince Akbar and to occupy Chittoor and Udaipur. The Mewaris heard of Dabir's coming, and that he had even occupied Chittoor itself, and they made their plans to entrap Akbar. By a series of feigned flights they drew the Prince into the famous *Girwa*, or the Circle, a name given by the Rajputs to the romantic valley banked by precipitous hills in which Udaipur is situated. Once within this Circle, Akbar's forces were attacked from all sides, and when the confusion was at its height Akbar committed the fatal blunder of attempting to elude his enemies by crossing over to Marwar by the Gogunda Pass. No sooner had he entered the defile than the thousands of Bhils who were eager to join the fray barred the outlet with huge tree-trunks felled for that purpose, and, manning the heights on either side, poured down a deadly shower of arrows on the crowded soldiery below. The bewildered Prince tried to retrace his steps, but at the entrance to the defile stood Jey Singh, the heir of Udaipur, with his grim Sessodias, barring his way.

At this juncture, when destruction stared the invaders in the face, an ill-judged piece of clemency on the part of Jey Singh allowed the son of the Lord of Delhi to escape in return for his bare promise to continue the war no more.

By this time Dabir Khan, who had left Jodhpur with seventy thousand men, pressed forward to Mewar, beset at every step by the indomitable Rahtores. Barely had he reached the confines of Chittoor when both he and the Emperor at Ajmere learnt that the gallant Durga-Das had retaken all the towns of Marwar, including Jodhpur itself, and was levying very heavy contributions on the Imperial forces whom he had conquered and disarmed. Prince Akbar, who by this time had reached his parent at Ajmere, was ordered to join forces with Dabir, and he proceeded to do so though overcome with shame at having to break the word he had given Jey Singh.

While the Prince and Dabir were uniting their forces and advancing towards the north-western shoulders of the Aravallis, Dyal Singh, the Civil Minister, who had by this time swept clean through Malwa, retraced his steps, and, combining with Jey Singh, gave battle to Prince Azim, who was entrenched in Chittoor, and drove him out bag and baggage from the territory of Mewar. Another invading force under Rohilla Khan higher up at Pura-Mandal was pounced upon by the fiery Sewal-das, the Salumbra (the senior noble of Mewar), and destroyed to the last man. These reverses lost Madhya-deś to Aurangazebe for the time being, and all his hopes were now centred on Akbar and Dabir Khan. They had general orders to do what they pleased with the

Rajputs, to lay waste towns and villages, or carry into captivity such of the inhabitants as escaped the sword. This ruthless conduct on the part of the Imperial troops roused the ire of the Rajputs to a frenzied pitch, and the Rana commanded Bhim Singh, his eldest son, to hurry up from his south-western post and join Durga-Das at Nadole. The Rahtores and the Sessodias thus joined heart and hand in an onslaught which bore death and demoralisation on the most terrible scale into the ranks of the invaders. The panic and confusion into which the enemy were thrown, were intensified after nightfall when, at the suggestion of one of the Rahtores, five hundred camels with flaming torches tied to them were let loose among the fugitives.

Prince Akbar, who was the son of one Rajputni and the husband of another, perceived that all these horrors were due to his father's obstinate policy of relentless severity towards the Rajputs. It was clear to him that the Empire could not gain anything by compelling thousands of the bravest of the sons of Hindusthan to sacrifice their lives in defence of their hearths and homes. He sounded Dabir Khan as to what he thought of these tragic events, and finding him open to persuasion, he urged him to proclaim a truce, and to send for Durga-Das (for the heroic Prince Bhim had fallen in the fight) in order that some effective understanding might be arrived at for the future. When Durga received this message, he was in the midst of a consultation with his captains with regard to a proposal some of them had put forward for a combined attack by all their forces upon Aurangazebe himself in his refuge at Ajmere, in order to

capture him and compel him to abdicate in favour of Prince Akbar. They argued that the present was the best opportunity they were likely to have, since the Emperor's forces had met with disaster all round and Prince Akbar was at hand. It was just at this juncture, when Durga himself was thinking of sending a message to Akbar, that the latter's emissary arrived with a request that the Rahtore General should make it convenient to meet the Prince. Though some of his captains expressed their doubts as to Akbar's good faith Durga laughed in their faces, saying that it was not easy for any one to capture or confine a cloud, and he set out for Akbar's tent, accompanied by about five hundred Rahtores. Akbar received him with all respect, and as the result of their discussion it was settled that Prince Akbar should be proclaimed as the Padishah. Within the next few days the third son of Aurangazebe was virtually an Emperor, sitting on an improvised throne and issuing his Imperial firmans, with a Mint of his own!

When the news reached the ears of Aurangazebe, he was almost mad with rage. Fear and anger fought for mastery in his breast, and in his wild yearning for revenge upon the Rajputs who had dared to suggest and support the treachery of his son, he declared that all the Hindus in his Empire, irrespective of rank or status, were to be liable to pay the *Jeziya*, the detested capitation tax! He sent an urgent summons to his other two sons to join him immediately with their forces. Realising that their arrival would involve a few weeks' delay, and that Akbar and the Rahtores were meanwhile marching upon him, he set his unfailing

ingenuity to work, and hit upon a cunning plan. He wrote what purported to be a reply to a secret letter from Akbar in which the Prince offered to accompany the Rajputs close to Ajmere and then suddenly fall on them. He addressed this reply to Prince Akbar and contrived to have it dropped into Durga-Das's tent. Now it is well-known that the Rajput, in spite of his bravery and his innate culture, is a most impulsive individual. His first impressions always sway him and lead him to perpetrate acts whose wisdom or folly only becomes apparent to him later on. He is stranger to reflection and deliberation. Even the great Durga-Das was no exception to this rule. He communicated to his friends the story of the plot he had so fortunately discovered. One and all agreed that there was only one thing to be done—they must part company with Akbar at once.

These events had taken place in the course of one night. When Prince Akbar, who had slept late, arose next day, he found that the Rajputs had abandoned him and had retraced their steps! He knew his father's implacable temper, and that if he himself fell into Aurangzebe's hands, as he was bound to do, his fate was sealed. Determined to make an attempt to win back the friendship of the Rajputs even if the endeavour cost him his life, he hurried in their wake, and, coming up with them, threw himself and his family on their mercy and sought *sirna* (asylum). He begged for an explanation of their desertion of him, and was told about the letter. The truth was soon revealed, and Durga's eyes were opened. The protection for which Akbar asked was at once granted. Akbar urged that Rajputana

was no longer safe for him, and that if only the Rahtores would take care of his wife and daughter, he himself would gladly take refuge in some far distant region. Even as they were discussing these matters, news reached them of the death of the double-dyed traitor Dabir Khan at the hands of Aurangazebe, and of the forces approaching in hot pursuit of Akbar. No time was to be lost. Laying his hands on his sword, the great and tender-hearted Durga-Das swore that he would both save the unfortunate Prince and take care of his family. He asked his brother Soning, as valiant a warrior as Durga himself, to look after the child Ajit, now growing to boyhood on the heights of Arbuda. He commanded Jaita Singh the Champawat to convey the Prince's family to his ancestral estate of Dhruva-nagar on the Luni, and to treat them with the utmost respect. Having made these arrangements, he called for five hundred volunteers to brave with him and the Prince the passage of the Nermada. The response was immediate. Surrounded by this band of heroes, he first made a feint towards Luni on the west, and afterwards debouching into the wooded defiles stretching between Guzarat and Malwa, he and the grateful Prince made good their escape to Sambhaji the Mahratta. This was in the year 1682.

When Aurangazebe learnt that Durga and Akbar had thus outwitted him, his fury was so terrible that it was dangerous to approach him. He commanded Azim to start in pursuit at once and to bring back both the rebels alive or dead. It was at this time, when Aurangazebe's vindictiveness towards all Rajputs was excessive even for him, that the

brave and wise Rana Raj Singh indited to him that immortal letter which, in the words of Tod, is an epistle couched "in a style of such uncompromising dignity, such lofty yet temperate resolve, so much of soul-stirring rebuke mingled with a boundless and tolerating benevolence, such elevated ideas of the Divinity with such pure philanthropy, that it may challenge comparison with any epistolary production of any age, clime, or condition." It is sad to relate that a few months after he had written this letter the noble Rana died of wounds received in the recent wars, leaving his second son, Jey Singh, to occupy the throne of the Sessodias.

CHAPTER V.

Four Years Later.

We now come to the year 1686 A.D. Durga-Das was still in the Deccan, making his name immortal in the wars of the Mahrattas with the Moghuls of Delhi and the Pathans of Bijapur and Golconda. Prince Akbar left for Persia soon after reaching Sambhaji's domains in 1682, in order to put himself effectively out of the reach of the implacable Aurangzebe. His wife and child remained under the protection of the gallant Jaita Singh, the Champawat, in Durga-Das's castle of Dhruva-nagar on the Luni.

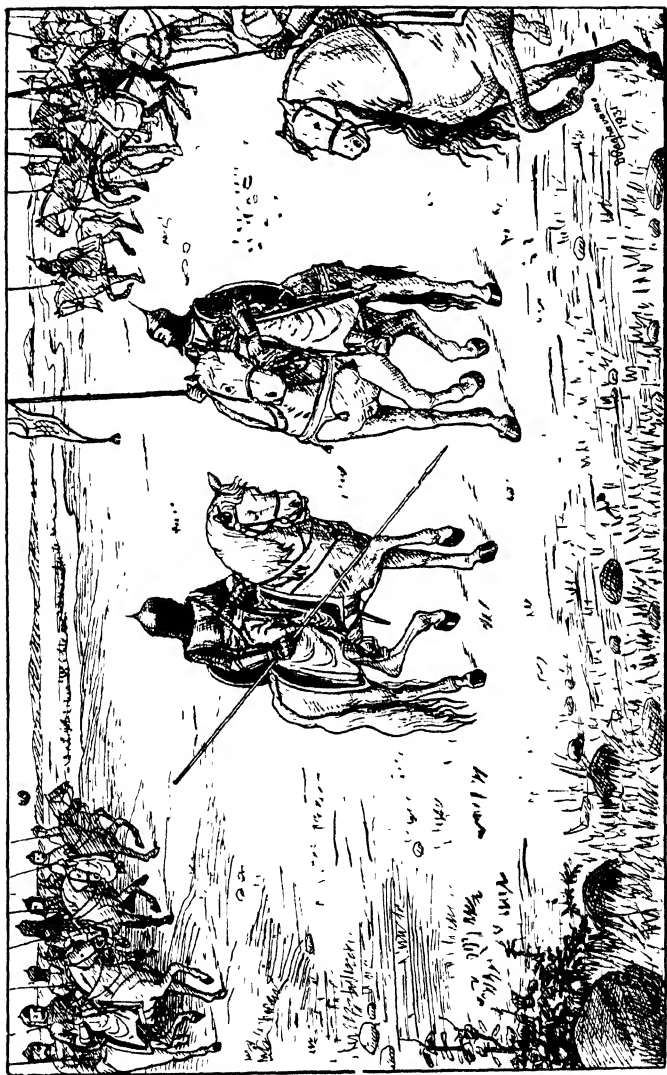
Aurangzebe had made frantic efforts to put down the Rajputs, and in the four years of Durga's absence a score of pitched battles had been fought between the infuriated clans of all Rajwarra and the generals of the Empire. Thousands had fallen on both sides, but while the losses of the Emperor were repaired by a ceaseless stream of fresh arrivals, those of the sons of Rajasthan were hard to replace. Many of their bravest leaders had already fallen, and it was not easy to find substitutes for heroes like Kesar Singh the Jadhav, Ram Singh and Samant Singh the Bhattis, Mukhya the Mairtea, and last but not least, Soning the dauntless, the elder brother of Durga-Das. As long as Soning lived, he was a veritable terror to his enemies, as he carried his *Tulwar Rahtoran* into every part of Marwar and

Ajmere, sometimes even dashing up to the very gates of Agra and Delhi. Prince Azim and his general Asad Khan, Prince Nur Ali, the ruthless Afzul Khan, and the crafty Inayet Khan, had all suffered at the hands of Soning and his fearless comrades, and Aurangazebe determined that the terrible Rahtore should trouble him no more. He sent for a few *Aya-Panti* Brahmans and commanded them to persuade Soning to attend a *Homa*. These priests are not Brahmans, properly speaking, but a degraded sect of worshippers of Aya-Mata the Terrible of Bhilara. They ate all kinds of flesh and drank wine and themselves immolated the victims dedicated to the Goddess. Aurangazebe gave them a deadly powder and ordered them to mix it up with the *havis* of the Homa, which they were then to give to the unsuspecting Rahtore. The plot succeeded, and Soning died. This gave great satisfaction to Aurangazebe and he departed for the Deccan, leaving behind him Prince Azim with Asad at Ajmere, Inayet Khan at Jodhpur, and Mirza Nur Ali at Sirohi at the foot of the western Aravallis, with strict injunctions to continue the war and the levy of *Jeziya* as well. The murder of Soning only redoubled the grim determination of the Rahtores, and under their new leaders, Shambo Kumpawat and Tej Singh, the young son of Durga-Das, the struggle went on uninterrupted at a hundred points.

This was the state of affairs when an accident happened to the child Ajit, which, if it had succeeded, would have blighted for ever the hopes of the Rahtores that one day Durga would give them back their Prince to carry on the name and fame of his murdered father.

We have already stated that Mirza Nur Ali and Afzul Khan were holding the citadel of the town of Sirohi at the western base of the Aravallis. Nur Ali was the son of a Circassian slave of Aurangzebe, and so great was the love the Emperor bore him that he named him Kam-baksh, "the gem of love." Well aware that his other legitimate sons would never allow Kam-baksh to survive when his father died, Aurangzebe lavished on this youth his utmost affection and never denied him anything he wanted. The boy therefore grew up wilful, headstrong, and passionate. Like attracts like, and in due time the young man was entrusted to the care of Afzul Khan, the son of a Pathan freebooter, whose chief title to favour at the hands of the Emperor was his ruthless ferocity. During the troubled period of the Rajput revolt, Nur Ali and Afzul remained at Sirohi lying in a gorge far out of the beaten track, and employed their energies in raiding and pillaging the surrounding country side.

While Afzul was out on one of these expeditions one day, he met a party of horsemen, and was about to charge on them when the leader of the strangers boldly came forward alone, and intimated to Afzul that he was a friend. Allowing him to approach, the Khan found that the youth before him was a Rajput. He was of a powerful build and of a dark and saturnine countenance. He led his horse alongside the Khan's, and told him that he was the son of Kishen Singh of Bhanpura, and that since his parent had ordered him into exile for what he termed his wayward life, he had come to beg the Prince to ask the Emperor



THE LEADER OF THE STRANGERS BOLDLY CAME FORWARD ALONE.

to set him at once upon the throne of his country; in return for this he would embrace Islam and double the quota hitherto contributed by his father to the resources of the Empire. Afzul heard this with delight, and he immediately took the party of friendly Rajputs to the citadel and introduced them to the Mirza in the midst of his revels. The Prince clapped his hands for joy, and welcomed the renegade with open arms, assuring him that he would persuade the Emperor to seat him on his father's throne within a month. Arrangements were at once made for converting the Rajput into a follower of Islam. A few days passed thus in increasing revelry, while trusted couriers sped to the Emperor carrying with them the letter entrusted to them by the Mirza.

One evening the Mirza and the renegade, now styled Futteh Khan, were taking a walk on the ramparts, and in a sudden burst of confidence, the latter told the Prince that he knew the whereabouts of Jaswant's heir and that he thought it would be the most acceptable service he could render to his Emperor if by his help the child was abducted and sent on to the Imperial Camp. Nur Ali jumped at the proposal and asked the Rajput to tell him at once where the boy was concealed. "Softly, Prince," replied Futteh smiling. "Mine is a secret which the whole of Rajasthan would go through fire to gain. With the exception of three or four people, not a single soul knows where the boy is being brought up. But for a lucky chance which befell one of my retainers, even I would not have learnt of the retreat in which the heir of Marwar is kept hidden. Listen carefully, Prince, to what I am about to tell you. The child lives on

the precipitous heights of Arbuda, and his guardians are two Keechees, Shiv Singh and Mokund. They dwell there under the protection of one whose name must be familiar to you—Madar Yogi. His haunt is a dilapidated Jain Basti perched on the solitary western precipice to which no one ever comes. I have sent the man who gleaned all this information for me to make his way up the mountain and come back with full particulars as to the time the ascent will take, the route to be followed, and other such details. On his return, I will send word to you and Afzul to follow me to the head of the defile leading to the hill, while I and my own men will scale the heights and try to steal the boy and bring him down to where you will be waiting. It will then be your task to hold him in safe keeping until he can be handed over to the Emperor.”

The Mirza agreed to curb his impatience till the necessary information had been obtained, and he and Afzul, to whom the Prince narrated the whole story, lived in an ecstasy of anticipation, Afzul even prophesying that if once they could secure Ajit the Emperor would show his gratitude by proclaiming the Mirza as his heir!

CHAPTER VI.

The Abduction.

Let us now return to Mount Abu. When Durga-Das separated mother and child and carried the latter to the lone heights of the sacred mount, the boy was barely six months old. The attendants on the babe were given the use of the rearmost portion of the huge pile, consisting of a closed court surrounded by a square with four rooms on each side, and a paved verandah running all round. There was a deep well in the centre of the court, worked by pulleys. The whole pile faced the North, and so the rear half lay to the south. In the massive walls on the east and west were low posterns with thick iron portals always kept barred on the inside. The best-preserved room in all the sixteen was assigned to the *dhai*, and this happened to be one of four in the western wing. The Keechees, Shiv Singh and Mokund, occupied two rooms opposite the woman's, and each party cooked its own food, as the caste of the *Goli* precluded her joining the others at meals. At about the height of a man, each room had a single window with stout bars of iron let deep into the masonry. The passage leading from the rear to the front was a gloomy, vaulted one, ending in a strong, wooden wicket, which, when unbarred, admitted one into a wide and lofty hall with two rooms in each of its wings, also with single windows. In

the centre of the terraced roof was a circular hollow arching upward, which was the inside of a beautiful dome ending in a pinnacle, the golden *kalasa* of which had long ago departed, leaving behind it the sharp iron support around which it had once glittered. At all the four angles of the terrace there were miniature turrets rising to a height of ten feet above the low parapet walls. Deep buttresses of stone supported the walls all round, their foundations going into the crevices of the steep precipice on which the monastery was built. But everything was in decay both within and without. The stones of the buttresses had grown loose and worn, and the holes thus formed in and between them afforded an easy ascent to goats, calves, and human beings as well. Any one who climbed to the top of the buttress had only a few feet between him and the edge of the parapet, while the windows between each pair of buttresses could easily be reached by leaning out to the right or left. Madar Yogi's favourite retreat was a room in the eastern wing of the hall, where, seated on a three-legged stool, he would gaze steadfastly through the window at the quiet mountain lake far below him with its dense, wooded marge and rock-bound islets. In accordance with his commands, the two Keechees never in all these four years ventured out during the day, but they would often ascend the terrace in front from the crumbling stair inside, and, kneeling from behind the turrets, let their eyes and their fancies roam over the wide extent of country on all sides, where they knew a great struggle was taking place between the hated enemies of Rajasthan and their own

valiant kinsmen. The watchful care of Ajit till he came of age was their duty, laid upon them alike by their beloved Durga-Das and by this stern ascetic, and they were ever praying fervently for the blessed day when this task would come to an end, and they would be free to wield their swords in the cause of freedom as of yore. Meanwhile Ajit was growing, and his restlessness at being forced day in and day out to keep to the four walls of the grim old monastery, with no playfellows except the listless *goli* and the fierce, bearded Keechees, told heavily on his childish spirit. Indeed, at the time of the incident we are about to describe, he had grown into a testy, sulky boy, whose one pleasure consisted in watching for the arrival of the Yogi, when he would run and clasp his knees, begging to be told some story or other.

There came a day when the Yogi left the monastery telling the two warriors, as usual, that he was not sure when he would return, and that on no account were they to unbar the huge doors in front to any one unless they heard the customary nine taps (in allusion to the nine traditional fortresses of Marwar). The brothers bowed their heads in submission, and after the hermit left, they duly shut and barred the ponderous doors. That night the child Ajit was inconsolable; he lay awake, shaken with stifled sobs, and nothing his guardians could do to please him seemed to have any effect. At last the woman turned to the men and said, "Thakurs, for four long years we three have been immured in this wretched dungeon perched on a hill to which even crows and kites are strangers. With the

solitary exception of that single goat-herd who sometimes, when the Guruji is absent, hails us from yon boulder on the western slope, none of us has known company or even human speech beyond our own. We aged folk have our sense of duty to keep us sane and, within reason, contented; but how can we expect it of this bright, high-spirited child of princes, eager to follow all the natural impulses of boyhood? It is true that his safety must be the first of all considerations with us, who for his sake have accepted this life of dreariness and solitude. But what harm can befall him if on rare occasions such as this we take him out with us, say, as far as the lake yonder! Will the heavens fall or his enemies scent him from Ajmere or Jodhpur? Come then; let us all go out with the child early in the morning, taking flour enough for preparing *bhatties* on the marge of the lake, and spend the whole day by the water, letting the boy romp about to his heart's content with you both beside him. What say you, Thakurs?"

It does not take a long time to come to a decision when people's thoughts are all travelling in the same groove. The *Goli's* plan was approved, and the brothers resolved to enjoy at least one full day of happy sunshine under the blue heavens before they were immured again within the dungeon on the return of the ascetic.

At dawn next day all three arose and, shouldering a few necessities for the day's camping, they took the delighted Ajit with them, locking the great doors carefully behind them. Making a detour towards the east, they came to the tangled goat-path which the ascetic used on his way to the

lake, and it was still early morning when they reached the groves bordering the water. Selecting a likely spot, they put all their things down, and telling the child to walk in front of them, went to the water's edge, and plunged with the utmost glee into the chill waves to complete their morning ablutions.

While they were all thus enjoying their holiday, the goat-herd, who had observed the unusual descent of the occupants of the Joghi's *basti*, hurried off unobserved by a secret path and meeting the renegade's spy, at the bottom of the northern pathway, told him of the Yogi's departure and of the expedition of the other occupants of the monastery to the lake that morning, accompanied by the child. "From the wallet slung on the back of the Guruji I can assure you, sir, that the saint has gone to Kailwa to meet the Queen, the mother of the child. It will take him at least four days to return. The men he left behind have taken with them all the necessaries for a whole day in the open. I hope, Sir, that you will not forget to give me the promised reward." Such were the traitor's words, and the spy, promising to see him richly rewarded, told him not to lose sight of the party down by the water, and said that he would return with his master and his men soon after mid-day.

In about three hours the man met his renegade Chief, who was anxiously on the look-out for him, and the news he had to give being of a pressing kind, Futteh Khan bade the man go to the Citadel of Sirohi and tell the Mirza to follow him at once to the foot of Mount Abu with about five

hundred men. Seeing the spy depart, Futteh hurried off with the twenty or so followers he had with him, none of them drawing rein till they reached the foot of the stone-flagged pathway leading up the mountain. Here the Chief asked three of his men to stay behind with the horses, and, taking the rest with him, he plunged due north-east across the slope in the direction of the lake.

The sun was exactly overhead when the Keechee brothers, who had been amusing themselves with fishing and other sports, grew tired and rejoined the *Goli*, who sat with the child at her side under a spreading *sal* tree. After a sumptuous meal, all of them sought a brief *siesta*. Ajit, who was too excited with the morning's adventures to go to sleep, lay listening to the loud snorings of the brothers. The animated cries of a flight of parrots at a little distance made the child curious, and he got up cautiously and approached the tree on which they were perched. Barely had he set foot within its shade, when an evil-looking Bhil pounced upon the startled boy and, pressing his palm against his mouth, lifted him clean from the ground, and made off quickly down a bypath. Then a strange thing happened. A Rajput maid of the Shantanu clan, Rupmani by name, was chasing a wild boar which had wrought havoc in a field of maize down in the defile that separated the western base of the Aravallis from the solitary, sky-climbing pile of Mount Abu. Armed only with a maize stalk pointed sharply at the end, she was in hot pursuit of the boar when she caught sight of a Bhil hurrying away stealthily with a struggling boy held close to his chest. Suspecting that this

was an abduction, the Amazon bounded over the rocks as lightly as a deer, and, when near enough to the man, she hurled the maize spear with so sure an aim that it struck the rogue in the shoulder-blade and brought him to the ground. Even as the boy was freeing himself from the man's grasp, another warrior seized his arm, and soon a score of Rajputs surrounded the two, all setting up a shout of joy at this easy capture of the long-sought prize to regain which both Rahtores and Sessodias would have poured forth their blood like water. Seeing these warriors, the maiden fled towards the lake in hope of meeting the great Madar Yogi, of whose prowess she was well aware in crises of this kind. Futteh Khan saw the girl running away, and guessing that she was hurrying to inform the Keechees and the Yogi, he and his men beat a rapid retreat to the northern slopes, with Ajit still struggling but held safely in the arms of a gigantic Hara.

Before the girl reached the water's edge in search of the hermit's boat, a commotion arose among the sleepers on the bank, the first alarm being given by the *dhai*, who noticed that the child was missing. Shiv Singh and Mokund were dashing hither and thither with drawn swords, when a panting Rajput girl ran up to them and told them that if they were looking for a child, they must follow a score of men led by a strange Moslem who were carrying the boy away towards the northern slopes. Calling down terrible imprecations on their own traitorous heads for not having heeded the Guruji's commands, they were about to run in the direction indicated by Rupmani, when she asked them what they

meant by their allusion to the Guruji, and if he was not with them on the mountain. The men replied with a groan that the Yogi had left a few days ago for Kailwa, then rushed after the fugitives. The poor *goli* stood rooted to the spot, wringing her hands and crying as if her heart would burst. Shaking her roughly and commanding her to cease crying, Rupmani was pushing the woman before her along the path leading to the concealed skiff, when lo! there stood before them the great Fakir himself, quietly getting out of the frail craft! On beholding these two women, one panting with excitement, and the other hanging down her head and weeping, he first addressed the Shantanu maid, whom he seemed to know well, and asked what was amiss. After kneeling swiftly and touching the sage's feet, the girl stood up and explained in a few words that she had first of all seen a child being carried away by a Bhil, and when she had spear-ed the man and was about to run to the boy's help, a band of about twenty men, led by a Moslem, had swooped down and carried him away. She added that two stalwart men, evidently relations of the child, were even then dashing to the rescue. Thinking that the odds would probably be too great for them, she had hoped to find the Guruji and . . .

"Stop, daughter," cried the Fakir, "Say no more, you have done well, but there is no time to lose. Come with me, both of you." So saying, and drawing his huge *tulwar* out of its steel sheath, Madar Yogi advanced a few paces to where a huge boulder stood, then knelt and gave the stone a powerful push. It rolled to one side, and a cavity came into view, dark as pitch. He leapt into the chasm

telling both the women to follow him without fear. When they had joined him eight feet below, the ascetic pulled a cord that hung down into the pit and thus drew over the opening a huge bundle of twigs which was always kept ready for this purpose beside the stone, and thus concealed the entrance. A dimly-lit pathway studded with rounder stones branched at right angles from the pit, and along this path the Yogi hurried, muttering to himself in a strange mixture of Sanskrit and Persian.

We must now hark back a little to follow the course of events when the Mirza received the spy's summons to repair instantly to Mount Abu with about five hundred men.

After the death of Soning Rahtore in 1683, Mokund Singh Mairtea took his place, and carried on the guerilla war as before, and at Mairtea itself he fell at dead of night on a body of Imperial troops led by Asad Khan, the Wazir appointed Viceroy of Marwar, by Aurangazebe, and compelled him to fly to Jodhpur. Mokund Singh followed up his advantage and joined Shambu Kampawat and Uday Singh Bukshee, who along with the dauntless Tej Singh, son of Durga-Das, were then leading the Rahtores. The united forces then sacked Pur-Mandil and killed its Governor, Kasim Khan. They next swooped down on the Moghul garrison at Jayatarun and swept the town and citadel clear of the foe. At the same time the post of Sojut was carried by Vijaya the Champawat, while the heroic Ram Singh, the lieutenant of Durga-Das, who had just returned from the south after seeing Prince Akbar into safety, sped northwards, and at Chera came suddenly upon a large force

bound for Sirohi, led by Mirza Nur Ali. A desperate encounter ensued, and the Mirza barely escaped with his life, attended by a few followers. Thus, during the four years after Durga's departure for Maharashtra, almost all the important clans of Rajasthan were up in arms against the Imperial Power, and not a day passed without an encounter in which hundreds of Rajputs fell, always taking with them at least ten times that number of their foes.

At the time of our story, the Rahtores were all lurking in the Aravallis, from the shelter of which they would sally out and fall upon the distracted Delhi forces whenever any opportunity offered itself. Driven from town after town all along a line from Jodhpur to Sirohi, the Mirza entrenched himself at last at the latter place, and even there he took refuge in the citadel, leaving the town and the fort in charge of the cruel Afzul Khan. While the Rajputs in the Aravallis were deliberating with each other as to an effective means of luring the Prince from the strongly-guarded citadel, a group of their horsemen galloped up to the camp one afternoon with the news that for some unknown reason both the Mirza and Afzul were marching rapidly towards Mount Abu, followed by about five hundred men. The day was well advanced when the joyful tidings reached the Rahtores, but without wasting a thought on the time or their strength, the two hundred men who held that particular fastness at once leapt to their steeds and flew rather than rode in the wake of the Mirza. The reckless Balla led them, Balla the dare-devil Chohan, who had cast in his lot with the Rahtores in defence of Jodhpur. It was nearing

sunset when the hotly pursued Imperialists, who had almost reached the foot of the sacred hill, turned and saw the hated rebels hard on their heels. Afzul gathered courage when he saw how few the pursuers were compared with his own forces, and, wheeling round, he ordered a general charge on the Rajputs, who were riding down on their mortal enemies without slackening rein. Balla was the first to get in a blow—a terrific sweep of his sword which carried Afzul Khan's head away to a distance of many yards. The carnage then became general, and the Mirza escaped in the confusion and made straight across country to where, in the gathering twilight, he could just discern the twenty or so Rajputs who had escorted Futteh Singh.

We now return to where we left the Yogi with the two women traversing the secret tunnel to intercept by a short cut the abductors of the child. Issuing into the open beside another huge rock, the ascetic, now transformed into a warrior, whispered a few words to the Shantanu maiden, and told both of them to keep well inside the pit. He himself crouched close to the rock, riveting his gaze on that part of the path by which the raiders must descend along the flank of the same massive boulder, within an arm's length of him. The men were hurrying down in single file, owing to the narrowness of the track, and the giant who held the child pressed close to his chest was the second in the row, the first being a common trooper. The apostate Futteh Khan was the last in the file. With one swift movement of his mighty arms the Fakir dragged the huge Rajput towards him, and before the man could regain his wits, the child

tore himself from his bosom and ran into the arms of a buxom damsel, who disappeared down an opening with him like an arrow from a bow. Before the astonished warrior could think of darting after the boy, the Fakir stepped into the path, pushing the man before him, raised aloft his huge sword and in a voice of thunder commanded the straggling line to halt! The men, seeing who it was that stood before them—the dreaded Madar Yogi of Arbuda!—hung down their heads and were silent. But their renegade leader strode up from the rear and confronted the hermit. “What does this mean?” he cried in tones of fury. “Is it for a trickster like you to meddle in an affair which concerns your master and mine, the Padishah of all Hind? Where is the boy, and what have you done with him? Speak this moment, or—”.

“Why should I fear your ranting, unhappy wretch,” replied the Yogi. “Before you threaten, look along the road and know the truth! See the witless Mirza sneaks towards you, beaten out of the field even like a dog. Nevertheless, the hour of your doom is not yet, though for one of you it is very close. It suits my purpose that all of you should escape, for the moment, your richly-merited fate; therefore, ere your enemies seek you out and slay every one, take yon path and slink away like the foxes that you are, into your holes!”

By this time the Keechee brothers had bounded on the scene with eyes flashing fire. Between them they held the treacherous Bhil, faint and haggard with loss of blood. “Guruji,” cried Mokund, “where is the child, and how is it

that all these Hara dogs and their vile Chief are going hence unscathed?"

"Softly, my son, lend me your ear for a while," and the Fakir drew the brothers aside and whispered something to them. This seemed to satisfy them, and all three then prepared to quit the spot, bidding the Bhil depart and keep silence if he valued his life. Meanwhile Balla, the Chohan, who from the field of slaughter had caught sight of the Mirza slinking off up the hill, gave chase with a dozen men, and just as Futteh's raiders disappeared beyond a projecting mass of rock, taking the Mirza with them, the Chohan reached the place where the hermit was standing with the two Keechees beside him. On seeing the ascetic Balla folded his arms and paid his devotions. Then he asked him if he or his friends had seen the cursed Nur Ali effecting his retreat by that route. "No, my son," replied the seer; "but tell me how it is that you and the enemy have met so far away from the wonted haunts of war, at the foot of this sacred mount? I was told that all the Rahtores were up north watching the defiles around Jhalore and Sojut, nay, even those that led to Jodhpur!"

"True, O Yogi," cried Balla, "but in the last six months, so heavy were our losses after taking Jayatarun that those of us who were still alive on this side of the Aravallis decided to take to the caves and to rush down from thence on scattered parties of the enemy going about plundering and pillaging. Word was brought to me and my men to-day that the Mirza and the hated Afzul were making a sudden dash to the foot of Mount Abu, and we

hastened off in their wake without informing the others. We met the villains, even as we had been told, and we have sent many of them to the halls of death. Afzul is no more, but the Prince has escaped. Seeing him slinking away in this direction, I followed and—”

“Let the Prince go,” said the Yogi, “his days are numbered. Return now my son,” he continued, “and join your men, and be on the look-out for the Mirza, who, I believe, will leave shortly for Jhalore.”

When Balla had gone on his way, the Fakir clapped his hands, and Rupmani emerged with the child who came smiling towards them hand-in-hand with the maiden and the *goli*. The two Keechees rushed towards the boy, and Mokund, taking him in his arms, kissed him all over in sheer delight and relief of mind. On the way back to the monastery in the gathering darkness, the Yogi reprimanded the three servants gravely for their disobedience that day, and he was specially severe towards the brothers for so lightly disregarding Durga’s express commands. “If I had not at the last moment put off my journey to Kailwa, in order to complete another scheme of mine on the island, I need not tell you how dire the consequences would have been. Take warning by what has happened to-day, and let it be a lesson to you to be doubly careful in future.” Then turning to the maiden, the sage passed his hands over her head and with an affection which softened even his habitually stern features, he chided her for being as much a truant as the others. “Daughter, have I not told you never to venture far from your fields, whatever the tempta-

tion may be? Now tell me what brought you so providentially on the scene." Rupmani folded her hands with an air of deep reverence and told him her part in the day's doings. She then drew him aside and whispered to him that Prince Amara of Udaipur had fled from the capital and was even then in close consultation with her father and brothers over his differences with Maharana Jai Singh, ~~his~~ father. This news agitated the Fakir greatly, and altering his previous plans, he commanded the brothers to hasten back to the monastery with the child and the nurse, and to take terms in keeping a careful watch till he returned. He then wended his way with the good Rupmani to her father's village down the abrupt north-western slopes of the sacred Arbuda.

CHAPTER VII.

The Death of the Mirza.

Three years had passed since the attempted abduction of Ajit—three years of unceasing warfare between the dispossessed Rajputs and the hosts of Aurangazebe. Driven out of every town of importance in both Mewar and Marwar, forced to seek safety in remote and inaccessible places, the Rahtores and Sessodias divided into two main bodies, ten thousand of them occupying the rugged defiles of Mairwara lying to the west of Ajmere, while another five thousand sought refuge in the caves and clearings of the north-western slopes of the Aravallis. Shortly after the incidents narrated in the preceding chapter, the Emperor ordered both Prince Azim and the Dewan Asad Khan to proceed to the Deccan, and Inayet Khan was left as sole Governor of Marwar. He had received definite instructions from his master to pursue the campaign with the utmost vigour till the Rajputs made complete surrender and yielded up Prince Ajit. The Khan accordingly filled all the important fortresses with trusty men, and took steps to enforce the collection of the Jeziya to the very last pie.

Such was the severity of these measures that the exiles cried out for the presence and leadership of Durga-Das in organising their resistance. *Charuns* (envoys) were sent one after another to the south to hasten the great Rahtore's return. Meanwhile, rumours gained credence among the

Rajputs that their beloved Prince, who was kept in hiding somewhere by Durga, was in the keeping of the mysterious Madar Yogi and the two Keechees, who, they argued, would otherwise have no business to be idling away their days on the heights of Mount Abu. A few of them went on to suggest that the renegade Futteh Khan had probably been attempting to capture the Prince when he induced the Mirza to make a dash to the foot of Arbuda three years before. At the mention of the traitor's name, many of the warriors exclaimed that their first duty was to avenge their national honour on that skulking jackal. The discussion was running high when scouts from the distant outposts ran in with the news that Inayet Khan was on his way thither with a force of twelve thousand men, and that the advance troops were already close at hand. The thousand Rajputs in the gathering at once grasped their swords and made speedy plans to sell their lives dearly. Soon every hill-top glowed with huge columns of smoke conveying the urgent summons for all the scattered clans to assemble. Expert mountaineers were also despatched to tell the Jodawats and Champawats on the other side of the Aravallis to rush down on the forts in the plains nearest to them and thus create a diversion in favour of the Rajputs. When all these arrangements had been made, the valiant thousand descended swiftly to the mouth of the pass, and lay in ambush for the advance guard, who were cut down to a man as soon as they appeared. By this time the other clans who had perceived the signal had come dashing up with hoarse shouts of "Bhavani-ki-Jai," "Har, Har, Mahadev," "Eklinga for ever!", and similar

war-cries, and the united forces rushed in a mass towards Inayet's main body as it entered the long defile that led to their lofty hiding-places. A terrific battle ensued, in which both sides left more than half their numbers dead on the field. The Khan's loss was the greater, as almost all his baggage and treasure as well as his camp-followers fell into the hands of his opponents. Not daring to expose the rest of his men to needless destruction, the Governor made good his escape to Jodhpur, pursued up to the very walls by a party of the victorious Rajputs. Another body of a thousand men sped in the excitement of the chase towards Mairtea, on the north-west, with Mukhya, its dispossessed Chief, at their head. Muhammad Ali, its Moghul Commander, came outside the walls with a large force, but so hot was his reception that he resorted to treachery to avoid complete destruction. He suggested a truce, and when this was agreed to, he invited the chivalrous Mukhya to his tent and there had him basely assassinated. In the confusion this caused among the Rajputs, Muhammad Ali made good his escape into the citadel. Vowing to exact vengeance on some future day, the Rajputs made their way back towards their mountain homes in Mairwara. Meanwhile their friends of the western slopes had sallied out with irresistible fury against the towns in the plain as far west as the Luni, and Palli, Sojut, Godwar, Mundore, Bagrie, Oostur, and Gangavi were all either taken at once by assault or else had to stand a furious siege.

Just then, tidings reached the victorious Rajputs that the depraved Nur Ali—now attached to Burhan Khan who

held Sewanoh, immediately to the north-west of Sirohi—had abducted two young Rajaputnis of the Bhatti tribe and confined them in the fortress. Subbul Singh the Bhatti flew into a fury at the news and shouted to his men to follow him at once, whether the main body cared to accompany them or not. The brave Ratna Singh the Rahtore calmed him, and the whole body, numbering about three thousand swords, made forced marches to Sewanoh, where they fell upon Burhan, and left him dead on the field. The cowardly Nur Ali fled towards Thoda with his women on hearing of Burhan's death. Disdaining any help, Subbul Singh rode off alone in mad pursuit of the Mirza, and coming up with him almost under the walls of the town, he pounced upon him as a hawk does upon a heron, and before his guards could intervene, the Mirza's head rolled on the sand! Of course, the dauntless Bhatti was cut down on the spot by five hundred swords—but Rajput honour was avenged!

CHAPTER VIII.

Prince Akbar's Family.

The clans then pushed northwards again to rejoin their comrades of Mairwara. When they reached Dhruva-nagar on the Luni, Tej Singh the son of Durga-Das, cordially invited the hosts to stay on his father's estate and enjoy a few days' rest. Soon after pitching camp all the leaders met together, and Tej suggested that they should first go to the citadel and pay their joint respects to Prince Akbar's wife, who had lived there with her daughter, these eight years past, under the protection of Jaita the Kumpawat. Every one knew of the frantic efforts Aurangzebe had made from time to time to secure the person of his granddaughter lest she should one day be wedded to the hidden Prince Ajit, and thus bring untold humiliation on the head of the descendant of Timur. But the very name of Durga-Das filled the Moslems with terror, even if the vigilant Jaita and his three hundred Kumpawats had not stood on guard in the impregnable citadel, to keep the sanctuary of the refugees inviolate. The Rajput leaders were eager to visit the unfortunate Princess, and to assure her of their utmost devotion despite all the endeavours of her father-in-law to capture her and her daughter as hostages for Akbar's good conduct whenever he should return. They accordingly repaired in a body to the hill on which the citadel was perched, and were conducted by the faithful Jaita Singh to

the audience hall, where, from behind a screen, the Princess received the respectful homage of many a famous Rajput Chief. In the course of the talk Jaita brought into their midst the sweet eight-year-old daughter of Prince Akbar, and the beauty of the girl, set off by the sedate gravity of her countenance, captured all hearts. Some of the less discreet of the warriors exchanged remarks to the effect that this rare Hindu-Tartar blossom would be a fitting prize for either of their Princes—Ajit or Amara of Mewar. "Stop," cried Jaita in a commanding voice, "the little Princess must not become a subject of discussion with any one who calls himself a Rajput. She and her mother have sought asylum with us, and our great leader Durga-Das has called upon all of our race to look upon these two as our most sacred guests. I appeal to Tej Singh, the present lord of Dhruva-nagar, to confirm my words." In reply, Tej upheld the point of honour and praised the brave Jaita for his chivalry in protecting the feelings of the Imperial refugees. The deputation then withdrew, after assuring both mother and daughter that nothing should happen to disturb their tranquil life under Durga's roof as long as they stayed there.

No sooner had they returned to camp than the sad news reached them of the defeat sustained by their Mairwara comrades at Mairtea and of the act of treachery on the part of Muhammad Ali which had cost Mukhya his life. The leaders then took counsel as to their future plans. The immediate problem before them was the capture of Mairtea and the revenge to be taken on the perjured Muhammad Ali for his murder of the brave Mukhya under the pretence

of a truce. It was clear that unless their enemies were taught a fitting lesson in this instance, the very word 'truce' would cease to have any meaning in their future warfare. Their next duty would be to storm Bhanputra, the seat of the usurper and apostate who now styled himself Futteh Khan, and to hand him over for the wild tribes of the Aravallis to execute what they termed their "Highland justice" on him, in return for the wrong he had done them in carrying away many of their maidens for his harem. Udhayabhan Singh the Jodawat here rose and claimed that the task of taking Futteh Khan to the abode of the Meenas should be left to him, as he had vowed to the kindly jungle chief Sujun, whose guest he had been at the time when Sujun's own daughter was carried off, that he would personally bring the wretch into his presence bound hand and foot, before many days had passed away. The renegade's many misdeeds added to his previous attempt to capture young Prince Ajit, had destroyed all feelings of pity for him in the hearts of the Rajput leaders, and none of them would raise a finger to save him from a miserable end.

When all the necessary details connected with the execution of these schemes had been duly considered, the conference broke up. The clans stayed at Dhruva-nagar for a week, and Tej saw to it that the three thousand and more men with their steeds had no reason to complain of the hospitality of Durga's domain. Then they separated, a thousand Rahtores under Sangram Singh to hover round Jodhpur, while another thousand were to speed on to Mairtea.

CHAPTER IX.

The Fate of Muhammad Ali.

It was the Aharea festival throughout Rajasthan. To the Rajputs this was the principal festival of the year. Like the Pongal of the Peninsula, it fell on the days when the first crop of maize and barley was harvested, and all the Rajputs, after seeing to the garnering of their crops, made ready to invade the hills and valleys in troops of hundreds, in quest of the wild boar. When the first boar was speared, great were the jubilation and the festivities attendant on the ceremonious eating of its sacrificial flesh. For the three days of the festival the whole country would be thronged with people, for emigrants would always return for this occasion, however far away their occupations might have taken them. Ever since the death of Jaswant Singh by poison, however, this festival had fallen on evil days, for there was not a single home, especially in Marwar, whose menfolk were not all hiding in remote places to carry on the perpetual warfare forced upon them by the severity of Aurangazebe. Nevertheless, the Aharea never failed to attract at least a few of the warriors to the Rajput freeholds, and the celebration was kept up as heartily as possible in the circumstances. For a week previous to the festival there would be a steady flow of men into every village or town, and the Moghul Governors, as a rule, relaxed their scrutiny of strange arrivals for those few days.

It was not surprising, therefore, that numbers of stalwart yeomen should straggle by twos and threes into Mairtea during this privileged week, and on the day of the festival a noisy procession was allowed to parade the streets of the citadel with the gaily decorated car of the goddess dragged by many devout hands. When the cortège arrived in front of the main gates of the fortress, the huge doors were thrown open, and a number of the Khan's soldiery stood at the entrance with their officers in front to receive the customary courtesies from the leading men in the procession. The next moment all was confusion, for a thousand men from among the followers of the car suddenly turned and rushed on the soldiery at the gates with drawn swords and deafening cries of "Har, Har, Mahadev." Before any one could grasp what had happened and take steps to meet the situation, the attackers had entered the fortress and invaded the Governor's apartments. In a matter of moments the astounded Muhammad Ali found himself trussed and bound and bundled into a sack, which was then hoisted on the head of a gigantic yeoman, whom the Rahtores knew as Tej Singh, son of Durga-Das. Before the enemy could collect their scattered wits and make any attempt at resistance, the Rahtores had made good their retreat to a grove outside the town, where a thousand horses were held in readiness by other warriors, attired as though for the gay *shikar*! The raiders jumped upon their steeds, and Tej Singh bounded away in advance, carrying with him the sack with its struggling burden, and the whole body galloped off in full flight towards Mairwara.

In a secluded glen with towering cliffs all round, the panting riders came to a halt. Tej Singh alighted from his steed, and dragging the sack after him to the ground, undid it, and freed the miserable Governor from its folds. Muhammad Ali's bonds were loosened, and he stood there, a ludicrous figure, blinking at the stern faces around him. A brief consultation ensued as to what fate was to be inflicted on him for his hateful treachery. Many suggestions were put forward, but every one approved of Rathan Singh's proposal that, on reaching Mairwara, they should let their comrades convey the man to the Aravallis and there hand him over to Sujun the Bhil with instructions to keep him confined in the caves till they brought Futteh Khan to be his partner in the execution of "Highland justice." Two days later the horsemen reached the camp of their friends at Mairwara.

CHAPTER X.

The Fall of Futteh Khan.

The united clans of Rahtores and Sessodias spent a few restful days in the defiles of Mairwara, and their sense of security was enhanced tenfold when news was brought to them that the gallant Durga-Das was even then on his way to join them there. His arrival was delayed, however, for important affairs affecting the well-being of Mewar detained him for a few days at Udaipur, and a heated discussion arose among the several chiefs as to whether or not they should push on to Bhanpura before Durga joined them. Udhaya-bhan rose and reminded the Rahtores how earlier in the month they had permitted him to effect the capture of the traitor to their faith and country, and said that he would like to depart at once with a few of his men to execute a certain plan which he had in mind. Nothing would please their great leader better than if, on his return from the south, they could bring captive before him the two blackest traitors in all Rajwara.

His colleagues pointed out to him the dangers of venturing almost alone into Bhanpura, teeming as it did with veteran soldiery. The massive Udhaya burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter at the idea that anyone of his friends should think of any possible danger to him in carrying out of his exploit. "What, my brothers! Are you Rajputs, and is it to *me* that you counsel caution? Is there any one

among the assembled thousands here that hopes to die in his bed, surrounded by wife and children? From the day the lion Jaswant died, and our other hero Maharaja Raj Singh, has any true Rajput known what it is to live under his paternal roof? Has not the Emperor thrown the mantle of his ruthless wrath over all the Rajputs, and have not the ease and the joy of normal life departed in consequence from every Rajput home? What, then, has any one of us to lose in attempting to win glory even in the face of certain death? Death at least will transport us to the halls of Indra, and our bards tell us that in *Vir-Swarga* the brave and the loyal are ever welcomed with open arms. Forget the very name of danger, therefore, and permit me this moment to depart on my mission!" So saying, and without waiting to bid farewell, Udhaya turned and leapt on his horse and dashed away into the fastnesses looming northwards, followed by about twenty-five of his men.

On reaching the confines of Bhanpura on the third dawn from the day on which their journey had begun, the gallant warrior and his men alighted in front of a ruined shrine, whose fallen pillars and mutilated images bore witness to the zeal of the enemy in destroying this ancient *Bhut-Khana*. A waterfall behind it allowed the men to perform their ablutions. The day was breaking, and the beams of the rising sun inundated the valley at their feet with showers of rosy light. As they were lazily swallowing their favourite maize porridge, their eyes caught sight of a poor *kunbi* (peasant) ascending the ghat, driving before him a couple of lean cows. They waited for the man to

come to the ruins, and then one of the warriors went up to him and asked him who he was, why he was toiling up the ghat with his cows, and why all three of them, man and beasts, were in such a sorry plight. Taken aback at first, the man gained courage on beholding true Rajputs around him, and then the flood-gates of his grief opened, and in a rush of words he related a story of the utmost woe. A few months ago, he was a prosperous tenant under a kindly chief, but the possession of a fair daughter had brought sudden disaster upon him. The son of their beloved chief, who was fighting for the Emperor in the Deccan, had coveted his father's throne before it became his by right. He had changed his religion to please the Emperor, who then conferred on him his father's possessions with the addition of two more fiefs. "This unnatural son" said the peasant "who is now known as Futteh Khan, was one day returning from a hunt when he caught sight of my girl Vasanta grazing our kine in the fields adjoining my home. He at once rode up to her, and, catching her up on to his horse, bore her away amidst the delighted shouts of his men. Hearing what had happened, I ran after them, beseeching their leader in God's name to spare my only child. All the reply I got to this was a few sharp words to his men, and the next moment half a dozen men galloped to where my kine were grazing and drove them off in front of them, leaving behind only these two old cows which, they shouted jeeringly, I might keep for myself! This happened two months ago, and the last glimpse I had of my unhappy daughter was as she was borne into the gates of the citadel

on the villain's horse. Not content with this, the wretch commanded my landlord to cancel my lease and drive me off his land. My wife and I are dragging out a miserable existence down this ghat not far from here, and I come to this shrine every morning to let my old animals graze about in these ruins. My tale is told."

The hearts of the Rajputs who listened to this piteous story swelled with uncontrollable wrath, and Udhaya questioned the man closely as to the renegade's movements, the number of men he had about him inside the citadel, and such other particulars. When he had obtained all the information the peasant could give, he told the man to make his way into the fort with a bundle of wood, and bring him word of anything unusual that might be going on. He bade him take heart again, as he and his men would do their best to recover his daughter for him. The peasant said that he was ready to take any risk if only her mother, who was slowly dying, could see her beloved child once more before she breathed her last. So saying, he departed, promising to return towards evening.

In due course he came back to the shrine and told the Rajputs that there was nothing of note to report, except that the Prince had fixed the next day for a wrestling match to take place between a famous Delhi wrestler and a local champion. Brisk preparations were going on in the *maidan* in the centre of the Fort Square, where they were putting a fence round the arena and to setting up a raised platform for the use of the Khan and his nobles. The Rajputs asked him a few questions, then retired to their pallets to seek

repose ere the tasks of the next day claimed their full energies.

At about three in the afternoon of the following day there was great commotion in Bhanpur, and the townsmen were seen crowding into the fortress to witness the wrestling. The great gates that guarded the Raja's palace were thrown open, and the guards had orders to admit anyone who came, first making sure that none bore arms of any kind. The renegade's rule was none of the mildest, and his conscience was not clear enough to allow him to be surrounded by subjects who carried weapons. When all the preparations were complete, there was a blare of trumpets and the sound of shrill pipes, and the multitude thronged round the fence beheld their Prince advancing with a smile to occupy his raised seat on the platform. No sooner had he taken his seat, than the nobles approached and tendered their obeisance, and the Chief Minister brought forward and presented the wrestlers one by one, giving brief particulars of each *pailwan's* previous achievements. Then the signal was given for the first pair to begin their match.

Three huge elephants stood in a row behind Futtch Khan, one bearing the Nawab's silver throne, and another his standard, while the third supported the huge brass-bound *nakarra* or giant drum. Now, by a curious chance, the regular mahouts of these three elephants were all unable to be present that day, and their places had been taken by substitutes. While the wrestling bouts were in progress, the new mahouts apparently found their animals hard to control, for the three huge brutes suddenly began to trumpet shrilly and to career

wildly over the thronged arena. In the confusion that followed, the stalwart standard-bearer on the back of the middle elephant urged his animal towards the platform, where Futteh Khan had risen in anger and was standing on the steps of his throne. A moment later the astounded spectators saw the mahout drag the Khan on to the broad back of the elephant and put a dagger to his throat! As though by magic, an array of nearly a hundred men, both Haras and Rahtores, had formed a ring around the three elephants, and, strange to say, all had swords in their hands, in spite of the guards' close scrutiny at the gates. "Treachery!" cried the soldiery, and their Captain called on his men to cut the traitor down and rescue Futteh Khan. "Softly, Commander!" thundered the mahout, who was none other than Udhaya-bhan. "If you or your men move hand or foot, your Prince dies here and now! Otherwise he shall live to account to the Rajputs for his crimes. The *Mahajan* assembled at Mairwara have commanded me to bring him before them. He is a traitor both to the father whose throne he usurped and to the Emperor who entrusted him with the good government of his subjects. Your Chief Minister shall rule the country till such time as your rightful ruler returns to your midst. I warn you, Captain, for your own good, that any attempt at rescue on the part of your soldiery will be futile, for the people of Bhanpura are on our side, and will overwhelm your Delhi hirelings if they but raise a hand. Now clear the way, worthy citizens of Bhanpura. Go into the palace, some of you, and bring here Vasanta, the daughter of yon peasant, and the daughter

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of Sujun the Bhil." "And, my daughter—and mine—and mine," cried several from out of the throng, and crowds of people rushed towards the Zenana.

Meanwhile the twenty-three comrades of Udhaya (two of whom were the mahouts on the other two elephants), who, in the course of the forenoon, had enlisted on their side a considerable number of the Khan's subjects, kept an unbroken ring round the elephants, drawn swords and grim visages guarding them on all sides. Two of the Jodawats hastened to Udhaya's side, and bound the terror-stricken renegade securely face downwards on the shoulders of the elephant. Then a shout went up as the people were seen coming from the palace conducting a hundred startled women who at first could hardly realise what had happened. Those who had relations in the city soon found shelter, but others who had been brought from distant parts stood wringing their hands in bewilderment. After seeing Vasanta restored to her delighted father, Udhaya instructed the citizens to take these unhappy women under their protection till their relations could be communicated with. When all this was done, he made a triumphant departure from Bhanpura, taking with him the three elephants, on one of which sat the Bhil maiden with two of her attendants.

CHAPTER XI.

"Highland Justice."

Our tale now takes us to a most romantic defile in the Aravallis. Rugged hills running north and south, rising at short intervals into fantastic peaks, enclosed a valley chequered with waving fields of maize and other grain. Many a pearly waterfall leapt sparkling down the slopes on either side, the waters gathering themselves at the bottom and rolling into nameless tributaries of the Chambal on the east. Countless shrines erected in the midst of glens sacred to Mahadeva or Asa-Bhavani (the Goddess of Hope) bore witness to the sacredness of this region. There was one temple especially, situated in a gorge of the western range, which, being dedicated to Katyayani (a form of Kali), was a favourite resort of all the Bhils, Meenas, and Kolis of Rajawarra. From time immemorial, the Bhils had exercised proprietary rights over it, and Sujun the Bhil, who had once given shelter at a critical moment to Udhaya-bhan the Jodawat, was at the period of our story the Chief trustee of the goddess. In order to perform his duties efficiently Sujun built himself a dwelling-place near the temple, and in due course what had been a small hamlet grew into a regular colony of such of the Bhils as had cast in their lot with the Rajputs in the struggle for independence. It was from this settlement that the marauding troops of Futteh Khan had abducted Sujun's fair daughter and a number of her maids while all the men were absent on a great hunting expedition.

The situation of the temple was awe-inspiring, in keeping with the deity it enshrined. It stood on a projection high up a mighty cone of granite, which fell away into a deep forest-clad chasm on all sides, except to the east, up which the ascent lay over a narrow flight of steps guarded by a double row of lofty trees with dense foliage. The Bhil colony lay at the foot of the ascent. A high wall built of unmortared blocks of stone surrounded the shrine, and outside this wall ran a path which was no more than a narrow goat-track with a natural parapet of loose rocks, the gaps allowing pilgrims to look through the shrubs into the dark, unmeasured depths below.

On an afternoon five days after the dramatic exit of Udhaya-bhan from Bhanpura with his prisoner strapped to the elephant on which he rode, a large concourse of Bhils and Rajputs had gathered in front of the temple. The doors of the main entrance were thrown open, and inside could be seen the image of the dread Durga towering over the stone lioness that crouched on a rude plinth between the deity and the altar. The goddess was profusely garlanded, and shining silver armour set off to full advantage the dark, scowling countenance with its forehead lined with three parallel streaks of sacred ashes. Huge brass lamp-stands on either side of her threw their unwavering beams on the goddess and on the minor goblins surrounding her pedestal. One of the Aya-pantis, the priests of the tribe, stood on either side with drawn sword, and right from the altar all the way down the approach to the very bottom of the steps, her worshippers stood ranged four-deep in

expectant silence, with their eyes glued on the level open space in front of the temple. In this small space were seated Sujun, the leaders of the different Rahtore clans, and a few of the Mairwara Sessodias, while in their midst, facing east, stood the captives, Muhammad Ali and Futteh Khan, both haggard and with blood-shot eyes, but still breathing defiance.

At the appointed hour, the sacrifice to the Goddess began. Another couple of Aya-pantis, who invariably officiated at these sacrifices to Durga, began a long intonation to the accompaniment of small muffled drums, and then the fatted buffalo was led forth, decorated with garlands of wild flowers, and its broad forehead smeared profusely with saffron and turmeric powder. One of the two priests standing before the deity with drawn swords then advanced, and at a signal from the leader, lifted on high his sword, and amid a general shout of "Bhavani-Mataki-Jai," severed the buffalo's head at one blow, while the other Bhil held a copper vessel to receive the blood. Then incense and camphor were burned before the deity, and a number of coconuts were broken. Chips of these coconuts mingled with crushed bananas sweetened with jaggery were afterwards distributed to all those present, and when this was over, the trial of the prisoners was begun.

Sujun arose and, turning towards Tej Singh Rahtore and Udhaya-bhan, asked them formally on what charges the Rajputs had made captive the two Imperial officers, and why they had been brought to the Bhil colony to receive punishment. Tej Singh then recounted briefly the treachery

of Muhammad Ali, who had inveigled Mukhya the Mairtea to his camp under pretence of a truce, and had had him murdered. Such a crime, said Ratan, was unheard-of even among the servants of the Emperor, and he urged that no punishment the Rahtores could inflict would be so effective as the one in vogue among the Bhils and Meenas for such heinous offences.

"Rahtore," said Sujun, "all that you say is perfectly reasonable. But our traditions do not warrant us in inflicting the punishment to which you refer upon men who have done no direct injury to ourselves. The case of this Khan does not concern us, and you must dispose of him according to your own code."

"But," cried Ratan, "are you not our allies, and is not the treacherous slaughter of one of our noblest patriots your concern as much as ours?"

"Nay, nay," rejoined the Bhil. "We are with you as a race in this present war of freedom, but it is nonetheless the fact that, Sabaras though we be, we are yet an independent nation, who may range ourselves against you to-morrow as readily as we stand on your side to-day. We are quite prepared to execute any decree of yours on this Khan provided it be other than our own traditional mode of punishment for criminals of the first degree, as sanctified by our goddess. Such is my decision, and I can hear no further argument!" With these words he turned towards Udhaya-bhan and asked him of what crime his captive was accused.

Warned by what had taken place, the wily Jodawat narrated a long string of the apostate's misdeeds towards the innocent forest-tribes of Mairwara and the Aravallis, ending with his abduction of the unprotected daughter of the Chief of the Bhils of that very region, together with three of her maids, all of whom had been forcibly converted to his faith. The three maids had been given to foreign troops, while the newly made Khan had kept the Chief's daughter in his own harem among his other woman. "When this abduction took place," Udhaya concluded, "I was your guest, O Sujun, and I swore before you that come what might, I would sooner or later capture this base ravisher of helpless womanhood, and hand him over, bound hand and foot, to the justice of the Bhils."

"Well spoken, Jodawat!" said Sujun. "We Bhils here present can vouch for all that you have said, and we appreciate the high motive which made you risk your life to repay our hospitality. The captive before us has indeed been a relentless persecutor of us Sabaras, chiefly because we have been lifelong and loyal friends of the noble parent whom this cruel young man has so unnaturally defrauded and betrayed. On him shall the Devi execute her will in the time-honoured manner sacred to the Bhils."

Sujun's closing words were greeted with a chorus of approval from all the other Bhils present in the throng, and the whole assembly then descended the steps to where their bee-hive huts stood in a clearing on the rugged slopes of the mountain range. In the meantime Tej Singh and his friends debated the fate of Muhammad Ali, and one

of the Rahtores suggested that the truce-breaker should be offered the chance of single combat with any one among them, with either sword, lance or dagger. He maintained that, although Muhammad Ali had outraged all the laws of honourable warfare, such treatment of him would prove to the world that the Rajputs at any rate were warriors and not assassins.

The entire assemblage now gathered in front of the village, and, at a signal from Sujun, fifty Bhils armed with bows and arrows took post on either side of the rugged pathway that led to the bottom of the valley, from which it ascended the slopes of the eastern range and ultimately reached the point where a beaten road passed north and south to all the important towns of Mewar. The Bhils, twenty-five on each side, stood at a distance of ten yards from each other. Each was to aim a single shaft at the running criminal as he sped by them. No one was to shoot more than one arrow at him if he kept to the path, but if he attempted to break away at either side, they were entitled to kill him with any number of shafts they liked. If the captive was so hardy as to escape death in spite of all the arrows that pierced his body, then the laws of the Bhil stipulated that he should be removed to the temple and laid on the altar for a short while, after which he was to be taken to one of their huts, and the powerful remedies known to the hillmen were to be applied to his wounds. On his recovery he would be admitted into their colony as a slave to the whole community.

By the time that all preparations had been made, it was near sunset. Futteh Khan's bonds were removed, and after he had been given time to recover the full use of his legs, he was ordered by Sujun to begin his race against the deadly shafts of fifty executioners—if he dared! The unfortunate young man looked all around him, but everywhere smouldering hatred met his eyes, and grim resolve was written on every feature. "Rahtores and Sessodias!" he cried, "think, is it fair on your part to subject a brother-Rajput to the punishments of a barbarous people? Great though my sins may be, is there nothing that I could do even now to make some atonement and thus secure, not life, but a less miserable death? Am I not after all a son of Rajwarra, a Hara, a Mewautee close to many of you by birth and blood?"

"Dog!" cried Bhakt Singh the Sessodia, the hero of many great exploits against the Imperial forces, "Dastard and viper! Do you dare boast of your kinship to us of the race of the Sun! Villain and traitor that you have been all your days, is there one single good deed that can be counted in your favour? Did you not thrust your own father from his throne by selling your soul to the enemy? Was it not you who plotted the abduction of the Hope of Marwar? Have you not from the day you sat on the *gadi* of Bhanpura piled crime on crime, oppressing the city and ravaging the countryside, a terror to all honest men and honourable women? Whom have you ever spared, that we should listen to your whining now? Time presses, O Sujun. Let justice take its course!"

The helpless Prince looked this way and that and his knees shook under him as rough hands began to propel him along the path. But just at this juncture there arose a commotion among the bystanders, and a majestic figure rode into their midst crying, "Hold!"

CHAPTER XII.

The Emergence of Ajit.

A month before the incidents related in the foregoing chapter, the brave Durga-Das had set foot on the soil of his beloved Motherland, Rajwarra, after an absence of nearly nine years. His life in the Deccan during these years had been one of ceaseless warfare in alliance with the Mahrattas against the hostile forces of Bijapur, Golconda, Vidharbha and Ahmednagar. His presence amidst the sturdy Mavalis of Maharashtra was a most potent influence in all their numerous successes, and the sorrow of that brave little nation over the loss of Shivaji and his bold warriors was forgotten to some extent as long as the Rahtore sojourned among them. But repeated calls came to Durga-Das from his unhappy country, and there was also the child Ajit, thoughts of whose welfare were never absent from his mind. At last he urged on Sahu Maharaj how sorely he was needed in his native land, and the King had no alternative but to consent to his departure. Refusing respectfully but firmly the many splendid tokens of gratitude which the Maharaja pressed on him, the great Rahtore bade farewell to Maharashtra and turned his steps northwards, accompanied by six of his countrymen, all that remained out of nearly two hundred who had stayed with him in the Deccan. The party reached the confines of Mewar by forced marches a fortnight later, and at Deval Partabgarh, the city of the

Chandawats, a descendant of Jaimul of Mewar hastened to welcome the hero, and Durga spent a few quiet days under his hospitable roof. It was there that he learnt that a grave state of affairs existed in the kingdom of Bappa and of Pratap. The great Rana Raj Singh had died soon after Durga-Das left for the South, and Maharana Jaya Singh had succeeded him. Even before coming to the throne, the Rana had distinguished himself as one of the foremost warriors of his time, and he kept up this reputation for a few years after his accession. Then in an unfortunate hour he took to himself a second wife, Kamala-devi of the Pramaras of Ujjain, who proved herself a veritable apple of discord in the politics of Mewar. From the outset, she evinced a keen dislike for the senior Rani, a daughter of the House of Boondi, and by a thousand little tricks she lured the enamoured Rana from her rival's side in the course of a couple of years. So infatuated had Jaya Simha become that he left Udaipur, the capital, for good, and betook himself with Kamala-devi to the luxurious palace which he had built on the shores of lake Jayasamund, an enormous sheet of water also his creation. The discarded senior queen dwelt in patient resignation at Udaipur together with her son Amara, the future hope of Mewar. Only a couple of months previous to the return of Durga-Das, this boy, then fourteen years old, had risen in open hostility against his heartless father. He escaped with his mother from the guardianship of the Prime Minister, Behari Lal, and made his way to Boondi. There the Haras of both Kotah and Boondi flocked to his standard, and with a force

of ten thousand men the lad set out to make war upon his father. His army was now encamped on the slopes of the Aravallis somewhere near the Naini Pass.

This news upset Durga-Das greatly. Amidst all the manifold evils that had befallen Rajasthan ever since Aurangazeb came to the throne, Mewar alone had kept its head high and refused submission to the Empire. The reason for its success was that there had never been any internecine intrigue in the Royal House of Mewar since the distant days of Lakka. Durga feared that this quarrel between father and son in Holy Madhya-desa presaged the beginning of the end—the end of Rajput dominance in Hindusthan. Accordingly, when his host told him that a number of the sixteen nobles of Mewar, with himself at their head, were projecting a journey to the Aravallis to interpose between father and son and thus avert war, the valiant Rahtore asked to accompany them. His support was joyfully welcomed, and two days later the whole party of about a thousand Sessodias arrived near Udaipur where the Maharana was taking up his quarters. On the confines of the city, Durga-Das parted company with the others, saying that he would hurry to the camp of the young Prince to give him advice while the rest were taking counsel with the father. He sped away on his mighty war-horse Vajra (Thunder-bolt), and he and his six companions reached the camp of the Haras next day.

At the sight of their great national hero, the Haras set up loud shouts of joy, and the news of his return to Rajwarra was soon flying all over the country. Durga-Das

told the men to lead him at once to the Prince, but when he reached the boy's tent, the guard said that the young man had gone to the end of the pass that very morning to consult the Shantanu Thakur there about the proposed raid on the Royal treasury at Komalmir. Being well acquainted with the Thakur, Durga left on the instant for the chief's entrenched village in the ghats. It was late at night when the Rahtores reached the place, and there, to their surprise and delight, they beheld Madar Yogi himself, also about to enter the gate. Durga at once jumped from his horse, as did all the other Rahtores, and greeting the ascetic in most affectionate terms, he first bowed and paid his respects, and then embraced him as one warrior would another. Madar Yogi's features relaxed their habitual sternness, and then the two friends fell into eager talk, Durga's questions all relating to the precious charge left in the Yogi's care on Mount Arbuda nine years before. Conversing thus, they were admitted to the simple but spacious mansion of the Shantanu chieftain, and though the hour was late, when the latter heard that the sage of Mount Abu had come, he ran half-dressed from his bedroom to the central hall to bid him welcome. On his way he roused Prince Amara, who was sleeping soundly in an ante-chamber, and they went together to pay their devotions to the sage whom the whole of Marwar and Mewar honoured and loved. What was the surprise of the Shantanu when he beheld, standing beside the Yogi, the great Durga-Das whom he believed to be campaigning far away in the Deccan! Refreshments were soon ordered, and an eager consultation ensued, in the

course of which two definite decisions were reached. The first was that Prince Amara was to disband his followers at once, and go to Udaipur to ask forgiveness of his father for his impulsive act of rebellion. Though it was not easy for the youth to swallow his pride to this extent, he consented to do so when both the Yogi and Durga-Das urged upon him how fatal it would be to involve Mewar in civil warfare just as the whole of Rajawarra was rising as one man against the tyranny of Aurangzebe. The second was that the saint and the Rahtores should repair on the morrow to Mount Abu to tell the boy Ajit who he really was, and what high destiny awaited him, and bring him away with them on a vigorous campaign for his restoration. It was time for the rightful Prince of war-worn Marut-Des to make himself known at last to his faithful subjects. Having come to these conclusions, the party retired for the night.

In the rosy dawn of the next day, a small party set out on horseback over the forest-clad hills of the Aravallis towards Mount Abu. The gaunt Madar Yogi led the way, seated with the easy grace of a cavalier on a coal-black charger lent him by the Shantanu. Close behind him rode Durga-Das on his famous "Vajra," white as the driven snow, and his six Rahtores followed one behind the other, astride the sturdy Deccan ponies which they had brought all the way from the South. The Yogi's amazing knowledge of this highland region enabled the men to reach the sacred mount at about mid-day. Long before they reached the gate, Mokund Singh, who was keeping watch on the terrace, hurried down, undid the ponderous bars, and threw the iron-

spiked shutters wide open. His lusty shouts brought his companion Shiv Singh to the scene, and hard at his heels there followed a laughing youngster about nine years old. The boy ran eagerly towards the party, and clasped the Yogi's arms as soon as he alighted from his steed, and raised them to his head. Then he stared hard at Durga-Das, who stood eyeing him with close interest, and at the other six stalwart Rajputs. It was rare indeed for such a company to approach his home, and he asked the sage who these strangers were. "All in good time, Ajit," was the reply. "We will talk later, but now the sun is hot, and we are famished. Give our guests greeting, and let us go indoors."

When, later in the day, the eager stripling was made aware of his true rank and identity, it was remarkable to see the air of dignified command which he assumed unconsciously and at once, despite his tender years. He participated in the further talk that ensued that night with all the wisdom and gravity of a young man from whom a great nation expected great things. Durga-Das complimented the loyal Keechee brothers on the splendid manner in which they had carried out their trust, and the motherly nurse obtained her meed of unstinted praise and the promise of a small estate with a homestead in Pali, of which town she was a native. With the break of day the whole party, with the Yogi again at their head, left for Kailwara, the dwelling place of Ajit's mother, the wife of Jaswant, who for more than eight years had borne in silence the pangs of a mother completely separated from her beloved child.

Great was the joy of this noble lady when her eyes beheld the venerable Madar Yogi, who during all these years had been a tower of strength to her, the bold and chivalrous Durga-Das, and her darling, long-lost Ajit, whose gait and features recalled vividly to her mind her lost hero, the incomparable Jaswant. She took the boy to her bosom again and again, and with many tears invoked the blessings of the "Wearer of the Discus" on her precious child, and on all those who had reared him and guarded him safe from harm for so many years. The grateful queen showered gifts on the humble *goli*, and presented the Keechee brothers, despite their protests, with rich dresses and a fully caparisoned horse apiece.

Just as every one was preparing to retire for a well-deserved rest, after a sumptuous repast, word was brought to the palace that on the following day the Bhils and Kolis of the Naini Pass were going to execute their "Highland Justice" on two Imperial Officers, one of whom was Ratan Singh of Bhanpura, otherwise known as Futteh Khan. The Yogi, never easily surprised, betrayed unusual excitement on hearing this, and told Durga-Das that they must again take the road and contrive to reach the Bhil colony before this awful punishment was inflicted on the apostate Prince. Durga agreed, and all sought their coaches to snatch a few hours of repose.

We now return to the scene below the temple of Durga as Futteh Khan prepared to meet his doom.

When the stentorian command "Hoid!" fell on the ears of those present, every one turned to look at the individual

who thus dared to intervene and a tremendous shout arose on all sides from the Rahtores: "It is Durga-Das, our Durga-Das! Kali-Mataki-Jai!" The Rahtores and Sessodias flocked together from all over the hillside, and the Bhils retired up the steps of the shrine in no pleasant mood, taking the two captives with them. Just then the well-known figure of Madar Yogi came into view, holding in his right hand his terrible broadsword, and clasping with his left the arm of a bright-faced boy dressed in princely garments, and looking also every inch a Prince! Behind these two appeared a score of determined-looking horsemen, foremost among them being the long-vanished Keechee brothers, Mokund and Shiv Singh! Before the crowd hemmed him round completely, the Yogi advanced towards the sullen Bhils and said: "Children of the cave and the jungle! Be not wroth that your sacrifice to the Devi has been thus interrupted! Guard well your captives, and to-morrow the ceremonies shall be continued in a manner to satisfy you all!"

Then, turning dramatically towards the onrushing Rajputs, the ascetic pushed the boy gently forward and cried, "Behold, now, sons of Rajasthan, and especially all ye Rahtores! Here in your midst at last is Ajit, the sole surviving son of the late Rana of Marwar, Jaswant Singh, preserved from his foes and kept in safety all these years by that paladin of Rajwarra, Durga-Das! You have long yearned to see him, and many among you had even given up hopes of ever beholding either the Prince or his guardian. Bid them welcome, then, for here they stand before you,

burning to lead you once more into battle for the honour and freedom of your country!"

Then, in the gathering darkness heightened by the gloom of the forest-clad slopes, a scene ensued that baffles all description. Rush-torches furnished by the Bhils threw into picturesque relief the bearded features of many a Jodawat, Kampawat, Mairtea, Champawat, Sonigar, Keechee, or even Bhatti, working with a passionate emotion of love and reverence, which found expression in jubilant cries of "Our Dhani has come! Our Dhani has come! Bread and water have regained their savour for the Rahtores once again! Long live Rana Ajit! Long live our gallant saviour Durga-Das! Long live our sacred Marut-Des, the Land of Heroes!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Ajit and the Bhils.

The next day the clans rose early, and all the leaders surrounded the rough shelter occupied overnight by their boy prince. Durga-Das and the Yogi conferred with the men as to what steps could be taken to appease the Bhils. There was no difficulty about Muhammad Ali. Ranmull Joda, cousin of Mukhya-bhan, undertook to challenge the Mughal to single combat with *tulwars*. If Muhammad proved victorious, he would be permitted to go free—and Ranmull smiled grimly as he said this. The problem was whether the Bhils were to be allowed to sacrifice Futteh Khan in cold blood, even though he richly deserved death in any shape at their hands. Madar Yogi had very pronounced views on these human sacrifices to the deity, which he as a Nanak-panthi considered hateful and barbarous. Nevertheless it would be very unwise to offend the religious prejudices of these rough children of the forest, from whom the Rajputs expected effective aid in their wars against the Empire. While Futteh Khan's fate was thus under consideration, the Bhils arrived on the scene in a body, headed by Sujun. The latter greeted the new-found Prince of Jodhpur in his simple, manly fashion, then paid his respects to both the Yogi and the great Durga-Das. "O Khetri lords of Rajwarra," said Sujun, "it is not meet that the Devi should be kept waiting for her due. We Bhils do

not care what you do with Muhammad Ali, but the other wretch, the ravisher of our women and yours, must pay to day with his worthless life the forfeit promised to our Goddess. Come, therefore, and let the interrupted ceremony of yester-eve now take its course."

Even as the chief was speaking, Madar had decided what he would do, and he told Sujun that they were all ready to proceed to the temple. Rajputs and Bhils then set out to ascend the hill, and in the general bustle the Yogi drew the young Ajit to one side and whispered a few instructions into his ear. Quick beyond his years, the boy grasped what was wanted of him and nodded his head. When everyone had assembled, exactly the same arrangements were made as on the previous evening, and the *puja* to the goddess began. The captives stood facing the altar, and around them were ranged the leaders of both races. The young Prince Ajit stood between Durga and the sage, looking attentively at the image of the goddess. The camphor had been burnt, and the instruments of music were sounding in chorus, when suddenly the boy sprang into the midst of the officiating priests and gesticulated fiercely for silence with uplifted hands. If any one had observed the ascetic at that moment he would have seen him staring at the Prince with a peculiar intentness. A hush fell on the concourse, and, in the profound silence that ensued, the boy exclaimed, "O men of little faith, are you then blind to the sinfulness of the act you contemplate? Have you forgotten that the man whom you would immolate in the ancient fashion I have sanctified is not of your own faith? And

dare you desecrate my altar with the blood of one who worships an alien god? Have done with this folly, and let these captives wreak on one another, sword in hand, in my presence, the punishment of their manifold iniquities! I have spoken." As Ajit ceased, a softness overspread the features of the gaunt Fakir, and he sprang towards the Prince and caught him to his bosom ere the exhausted boy sank to the ground.

Great was the consternation depicted on the faces of the Bhils when they realised the enormity of the sin they had been about to commit. Thankful to their beloved goddess for having saved them from such an offence and its consequences, they turned their attention towards clearing a sufficient area for the combat between Muhammed Ali and Futteh Khan to take place, and the bonds of the captives were loosened. A couple of sturdy Bhils massaged deftly the arms and legs of both men, and two keen swords were brought and handed to them. A feeling of immense relief took the place of the nightmare fear with which the young Hara had been afflicted, while Muhammad Ali cared little how he died, since he knew that die he must. Before the word was given for the combat to start, Sujun declared in the presence of all that the victor, if each did not kill the other, would be free to go away wherever he pleased, since neither of the combatants belonged to his faith. Then the fight began.

The issue was a foregone conclusion. Muhammad Ali was old, and recent happenings had impaired his vitality, whereas Futteh Khan was a Rajput whose prowess with

sword or lance was a theme for praise among the Haras. In addition to this, his release from the dread of an agonising form of death lent him fresh spirit and new strength. After a few minutes of furious lunging, slashing, parrying and hacking, a well-directed blow from Futteh clove the skull of Muhammad Ali. The latter fell, but even as he toppled forward his sword sought the bosom of his adversary and penetrated close to the heart, and Futteh too sank to the ground. Durga-Das raised the unfortunate Futteh on his knee, and the youth had just strength enough to whisper into the Rahtore's ears his deep repentance for his offences against his father and the whole manhood of Rajwarra, and a last petition that his remains might be cremated in Bhanpura. It speaks volumes for the magnanimity of the Rajputs that they found means to send his body to Bhanpura for cremation, and in addition to this the Yogi undertook to inform Himmudt Singh, the father, who had found asylum at the court of the Maharana of Mewar, that he could return to Bhanpura to occupy the throne from which he had been ousted by his misguided son.

The leaders were now free to consider the best means of rousing the scattered clans of Marwar to concerted action by virtue of the renewed enthusiasm which they knew would be felt throughout Rajwarra at the news of the emergence of Prince Ajit from his place of refuge in company with the national hero.* Durgā-Das. *Charuns* and *Bhats* were despatched on all sides to convey to both Mewar and Marwar the glad tidings of Durga's return and to raise the banner of Marut-des in the name of Prince Ajit, the heir

of the departed Jaswant Singh. Meanwhile the hero of a hundred fights took leave of his hosts for a short while in order to accompany his son Tej Singh to Dhruva-nagar, and he enjoined on all his followers the utmost vigilance in guarding the precious life of the Hope of Marwar during his brief absence. He promised that he would return as soon as he had had an opportunity of seeing how the wife and daughter of Prince Akbar were faring in his castle during his long absence.

CHAPTER XIV.

Dhruva-Nagar.

Durga-Das's domain on the Luni was for the most part a sandy arid tract of country, the three hundred odd villages it contained being embosomed amidst oases nourished on the numerous off-takes from the dark, brackish river of western Rajwarra. Here and there isolated granite peaks with green, tree-clad shoulders rose from the sandy, scrub-covered wastes. The land was really part of that vast expanse of sand known as Jessulmeer, and had passed from Bhatti to Rahtore ownership about fifty years previous to our story. The forbears of Durga-Das had always ranked among the foremost of the nobles of Jodhpur, and on one occasion when his grandfather found it necessary to invade Dhruva-nagar, to punish a certain Bhatti chief for raiding Marwar cattle, the then Rana settled the region on the valiant Rahtore, only stipulating that his descendants should always place the resources of the estate at the disposal of Jodhpur whenever required. Till Aurangzebe ascended the Imperial throne, the relations of Marwar with the Empire had always been cordial, and none of its constituent States had been called upon to take up arms in self-defence. But with Aurangzebe's accession the policy of the Empire changed, and when Jaswant was murdered in distant Kabul, all the eight great divisions of Rahtores abandoned their peaceful avocations, and together with their tenants, now

turned into soldiers, kept up an incessant struggle with the commanders—both Hindu and Moslem—whom the Emperor appointed to occupy all rebel towns and fortresses. But while every other castle in Marut-des had been compelled to yield, Dhruva-nagar maintained its independence under the inspiration of young Durga-Das, whom no threats or offers of reward could influence. Just before Durga left for Kabul with his master Jaswant, somewhere about 1670, an incident happened which made even the relentless Aurangzebe refrain from further molesting the champion of the Rajputs. The occasion was one which was not rare in the annals of the Mughal Court in those days. One day, while the Imperial Durbar was being held in Agra, a discussion arose in the presence of the Emperor about the practice among some Rajputs of paying worship to lions as others did to the cobra. Some one then said that a few of these lion-worshippers were present in the assembly, and among those pointed out were Durga-Das and a cousin of his who bore him constant ill-will. The Emperor asked the latter if he would demonstrate the ritual before the Court. Bhangi-Das at once rose and pointed out to the Emperor that the worship in question was not offered to actual lions in their wild state but to their images in temples sacred to Vir-bhadra. "But, your Majesty," he added, "my cousin, the brave Durga-Das, disdains to worship images of wood or stone, and he performs his *pūja* to real living lions. He will, I am sure, be willing to do so in your presence at any time your Majesty pleases."

Bhangi-Das made this malignant remark because he was sure that Durga's pride would compel him to accept the challenge and thus to court death before them all that very day. Jaswant Singh, who was seated near Durga-Das, knew that his enemy's statement had no foundation in fact, and he begged the Emperor to treat the matter as a joke. "Nowhere," he said, "do men in this degenerate age worship living tigers or lions or even serpents."

"Nay, nay," rejoined the monarch. "The fame of thy vassal Durga is great in the land, and he must maintain it in our presence this very moment." So saying, he clapped his hands, and issued instant commands that the cage of the fiercest lion the royal camp possessed should be dragged into the court.

All this while Durga-Das stood silent without moving a muscle of his face, and when the cage was brought into the open space before the throne, he merely asked the men surrounding it to bring him the materials for the rite. When the flowers, vermillion, fruits, coconuts and camphor had duly been brought, he took the large tray containing them in his hands, and told the men to open the doors of the cage. Thrusting the tray before him, he entered quickly and had the doors fastened behind him. Then, as calmly as if he were approaching a pet lamb, he went step by step towards the monarch of the wilds, and to the astonishment of every one present, the huge brute advanced as quietly towards him and bowed its head as though to receive the garland that lay on the tray. Durga at once stooped and put the garland round the lion's massive neck, and

proceeded next to paint the spot between his eyes with the *kum-kum*, after which he tranquilly finished the prayers proper to the occasion. Then he signed to the men outside to unfasten the doors, and came out as coolly as a worshipper from a shrine in the heart of a city. A tremendous cheer arose from all present at the Durbar, and the Emperor graciously beckoned to the dauntless Rahtore, and after complimenting him profusely, asked him what boon he would desire at his hands.

"I want no boon, your Majesty," said the hero. "except a promise from your august lips that you will never again subject an innocent man to such an unnatural ordeal. As for my good cousin who so kindly misled your Majesty regarding my worship of living lions, you and all this gathering may rest assured that I shall reward him duly before many days are over for thus commending me to your favour!"

The Rahtore was as good as his word, for the very next day his enemy, who had decided to get out of his reach as quickly as possible, was pursued by Durga-Das, dragged from his horse, and told to defend himself forthwith. The trembling wretch could hardly lift his sword, and Durga, disdaining to kill him, made him run behind his mount all the way to Dhruva-nagar, where he made a barber take one side of his moustache off and also shave half his head, which was then ornamented with a crown of dirt. Thus adorned and mounted on a donkey, Bhangi-das made thorough expiation for his piece of treachery being hooted and spat upon by men, women, and children in every street

and lane through which the procession was urged on by the stalwart men-at-arms of Durga behind! Thus for more than one reason Dhruva-nagar was the only spot in all Marwar untrodden by foreign feet during the whole lifetime of the great Rahtore.

Durga-Das was accompanied on his rapid journey to his estate by a mere handful of men, including his son Tej, the mysterious Madar Yogi, the loyal Ram Singh Kampawat, who had gone with his chief when he escorted Prince Akbar to Maharashtra, the stouthearted Keechees, Shiv Singh and Mokund, and the six Rahtore cavaliers with whom he had returned to the land of his fathers. The little company pushed on rapidly across the hills due west to the banks of the salt-encrusted Luni, and before many days were over, they set their feet on the heights on which the castle was built.

The joy of Jaita, the faithful Kampawat, and his handful of warriors knew no bounds when the long-looked-for Durga-Das stood before them, and Tej Singh, taking the keys of the citadel from Jaita, bowed before his parent and tendered them to him with both hands. Alighting from his magnificent steed Vajra, Durga-Das affectionately pressed them back on Tej, telling him that he and Jaita were their fittest guardians.

After spending some time in removing the traces of the rapid and arduous journey, Durga-Das told Jaita to inform Prince Akbar's wife of his arrival, and ask if she would receive him in the hall. Jaita hurried into the inner apartments and came back with a message from the Princess

that the hero who had been more than a father or guardian to her was welcome at any moment.

Akbar's wife was a Rajaputni of Kotah and a Harawat of royal descent. She was only twenty-eight years old at the time of our story, and for the past nine years she had been to all intents a widow. Her husband after having been so gallantly rescued by Durga-Das from his father's clutches, had escaped to Persia long ago, and nothing had since been heard of him to indicate whether he was alive or dead. Meanwhile, his daughter, Roshinara, was growing into a maiden of rare beauty, and the mother's heart was torn between love and duty as she debated with herself whether or not she ought to keep the girl with her any longer at Dhruva-nagar. The difficulty was that the Princess of Kotah had retained her own belief as a Hindu wife even while she lived with her husband, but her little girl had been, like her father, a Moslem from her birth and had been brought up in the ways of the Imperial Court. Owing, however, to the length of time she had spent in the care of the Rajputs, the girl had naturally fallen into the ways of living and thinking of the people who surrounded her, with the result that at the period we have now reached she may be said to have forgotten that she was a Moslem Princess of the Imperial House of Baber. As the years went by without bringing Akbar back to her side, her mother had grown indifferent to the future, and never thought of the time when the daughter would, after all, have to be given into the Emperor's care. Little Princess Roshinara, therefore, had practically become a

Rajput maiden, and offered up her childish prayers to deities detested by all her father's race.

Such were some of the factors in the sad story that the Emperor's daughter-in-law poured into Durga-Das's ears as she stood before him, crying and wringing her hands. What could the brave Rajput do? At the best of times he knew very little of women, and his one wife, whom he had dearly loved in his own strong, silent way, had departed this world long ago, leaving behind her the babe Tej Singh. After her death, he scorned to marry again, but all women were sacred to him for her sake. In his kindest tones he advised the unfortunate Princess to cease lamenting in vain the fate that the gods had chosen to inflict, and urged her to devote herself to training her daughter as a royal maiden of the Imperial House, and not let her drift into other ways. "It will be my bounden duty," he said, "to restore you both to the Court at Delhi when I succeed in extracting from the Emperor adequate safeguards for your future. For the present I am still in the dark as to the situation in Rajwarra after my eight years of absence in the South. As soon as I have restored my late master's heir Ajit to his throne, and have set him in power amidst his faithful *Rahtore tulwaran* (the swords of the Rahtores), I will turn my attention to your affairs and send you both with all due honours to the Court of your father-in-law. Till then abide here in peace, and have no fear that the Emperor may carry you off by force. I have brought with me the great Madar Yogi of Mount Abu, whom I have asked to undertake at once the instruction of the little Princess in the ways of her father's

faith." So saying, he went out for a moment and returned with the gaunt, grave-looking monk, who held in one hand a rosary and in the other the Koran. Both mother and daughter at once knelt at his feet and bowed low to the ground with folded hands. He asked them gently to rise. Princess Roshinara edged away from him as though in fear and doubt, but the ascetic took both her hands, and then laid his own right hand on the trembling maiden's head with its wealth of glossy tresses, and bowing his head, uttered a silent prayer. Next moment, to the amazement of both Durga-Das and her mother, the girl raised her face and, smiling happily as though freed from an ugly dream, nestled close to the side of the great Fakir. "It is well, Rahtore," said the latter, turning towards Durga. "Go your way and have no fear for these two dear charges whom you are leaving in my care. A time will come, O Durga, when I shall bear witness before God and the Emperor, how nobly you have accomplished, with the aid of your son and Jaita, your servant, the duties of the guardian of two precious members of the Imperial Household. Go now in peace!"

Having thus settled to his satisfaction the immediate future of Prince Akbar's wife and daughter, Durga-Das was about to mount Vijra preparatory to speeding away with his comrades to the Aravallis, when two of the guards of the fortress ran into his presence with a message from Jaita that a large mounted body of the Emperor's troops was approaching the castle, having routed on their way the garrison of the town below. "Ah" cried Durga-

Das, "this force must be from Pachbhadra, and its commander must have learnt that I am back in Rajwarra. He does not know that I have visited the castle, and believes me to be still in Mewar, so he is making one more attempt to abduct the Princess. Thank Kanya (God Krishna) that I am here in person to teach my enemies a bitter lesson for having set foot in Dhruva-nagar."

Thereupon he issued rapid orders to his son Tej Jaita the Champawat and Ram Singh the brave Kumpawat to hurry down the hill on three sides, each with fifty men of the garrison on the hill, while he and his other veterans with a similar number dashed down the steps in front. Before descending he summoned the Yogi to his side and issued instructions for the main gate and the four corners to be guarded by the remaining hundred troops of the fortress. By this time the enemy's forces had galloped hard to the very foot of the hill, but instead of spreading out on reaching it, they retained the same formation of four abreast which they had been compelled to adopt on their way through the narrow road that led up from the town. This proved their Nemesis. As it approached the citadel the road ran through a tunnel bored through a bed of hard gravel rising several feet high on either side. Hardly had the leading ranks of horsemen reached the arched gateway with its *naubat-Khana* when with tremendous shouts of "Har, Har, Mahadev!" and "Jai, Jai, Durga-Das!" a number of Rajputs appeared on the tops of the ridges, showering down on men and horses below a veritable deluge of rocks and small stones. The confusion thus caused was heightened a



DURGA-DAS, CHARGED FURIOUSLY DOWN UPON THE FRONT RANKS.

thousand-fold, when Durga-Das himself, wielding his terrible sword "Bir-Bhadra" charged furiously down upon the front ranks and drove them helter-skelter back upon the men behind them.

The extreme rear, which had just entered the mouth of the tunnel, was thus forced to fall back and spread out into the scrub at either side of the narrow path. Then, from the heights above there came an array of grim Rajputs, shouting their terrible war-cries, who fell on the disordered soldiery with sword and spears. Trapped on all sides and bewildered at the turn events had taken, and still more by the unexpected presence of Durga-Das, the Imperial force of five hundred horsemen was defeated and broken in a matter of moments. Only about a hundred and fifty escaped with their lives, and these followed the example of their commander in throwing down their swords and asking for quarter. No one ever appealed to a Rajput in vain for his life, and Durga-Das gave them the protection they sought. Their Captain then told Durga that he had brought with him a number of women with palanquins, who were all waiting in the town to escort the Princess and her daughter to Agra. "Excellent," cried Durga-Das, "these women of yours are a welcome addition to the Princess's staff of attendants and they will also serve as hostages for your future good behaviour!" So saying, he ordered his men to convey all these women to the Citadel. "But, Jaita," he added, "see that none of them incur any indignity at the hands of your men. The least suspicion of any such

conduct will cost the guilty one his life the moment I come to hear of it."

Then, taking leave once again of the Princess and Madar Yogi, Durga-Das returned to the camp of the Rahtores in the Aravallis as fast as his horse could take him.

CHAPTER XV.

Shafi Khan of Ajmere.

Five years had passed—years filled with incessant struggle on the part of the sons of Rajasthan, especially the men of Jodhpur, to free the land from their enemies. Prince Ajit had been welcomed with open arms by all the eight divisions of Marut-des, and though almost all the chief towns and citadels remained in the possession of Delhi, yet the Emperor's mandate was scarcely recognised outside their walls. Inayet Khan, Hakim (Governor) of Jodhpur, was dead, and Sujait Khan was ruling in his stead. Shams-ud-din, a Pathan, was in charge of Jhalore, and Burhan Khan Governor of Sewanoh. Shafi Khan, a trusted General of the Emperor, was made Hakim of Ajmere in the place of Shuja Khan, who was recalled to Delhi in disgrace for having fled from the field during an engagement with Mokund-das Champawat. The Emperor had issued special instructions to Shafi that it was his particular task to make an end of Durga-Das by fair means or foul, and that if he succeeded his reward would be the viceroyalty of Jodhpur, including that of Ajmere and Mairwara. It was characteristic of Aurangzebe that while he was thus dangling the viceroyalty of Marwar before Shafi Khan, he was also making attempts in another direction to set a Rana on its throne in the person of one Udayadit, a distant cousin of Ajit many times removed. This youth was a dull, sluggish creature, as black as night, and of a corpulent figure which earned

for him the nick-name of Motah Raja among the wits of the Emperor's Court. For some years this young man had been a hanger-on in the Imperial suite, always urging it on the nobles in intimate attendance on His Majesty that Ajit was not the son of the late Jaswant, that the Rahtores had palmed off an illegitimate child of Durga-Das on the unsuspecting Queen and the Nation, and that he himself ought to be placed on the throne of Marut-des. In return for this he was prepared to abandon his faith as well as to observe any other condition or conditions imposed upon him. Instead of settling the matter definitely one way or the other, the crafty Aurangzebe kept the silly young man always in hope, deferring his final decision for month after month. About 1696, matters had reached such a stage that any further delay in disposing of the Rajput problem meant untold complications for the Emperor. His wars in the Deccan could not be prosecuted with the proper vigour; the valuable trade of the West Coast which passed overland through Rajasthan to Kabul, Persia, Syria, and finally to Europe, was almost being annihilated by the implacable banditry of the Sessodias and Rahtores; and above all, Prince Ajit was now reaching manhood, and Durga-Das refused to listen to any proposals, menaces, or bribes regarding the restoration of Princess Roshinara to her grandfather. What if Ajit, of whom reports reached the Emperor that he was a most handsome, gallant, and impetuous young man—what if this Ajit, aided by the arch-fiend Durga, won over the Princess to be his wife? Could there be a greater calamity to the race of Timur and Jenghiz?

Distracted by all these fears, Aurangazebe took counsel with his favourite ministers, and with their approval he proclaimed throughout his dominions that a new heir to the throne of Jodhpur had just been found, with claims better than those of Ajit, and that this young man, who had embraced Islam, was none other than a son of the late Jaswant, discarded by his father and banished from the Kingdom for no other fault except that he was dark of skin and pacific in temperament. Out of his great love for the suffering Rahtores, the Emperor—so the proclamation went on—was crowning this new-found Prince as Rana of Marwar, and he would, after the coronation, send him to his dominion, accompanied by an Imperial force large enough to maintain his dignity!

Before tidings of this new move on the part of his master reached Shafi Khan, he had set his wits hard at work to crush Durga and Ajit. His spies told him that the Rahtores were encamped on the border between Ajmere and Mairwara and that they did not seem to be expecting an attack from any quarter in the near future. "Good!" exclaimed the Khan. "Now we will swoop upon these traitors and humble the pride of that boaster Durga-Das." Orders were issued to the captains under him to assemble at once a picked force of three thousand men, and to march from Nasarabad south-west along the road to Bewar, where the Khan was told that Durga-Das was lurking in the hope of surprising that frontier outpost. The distance was about forty miles, and the Khan hoped to take Durga by surprise twenty-four hours after starting, by means of a forced

march. The army set out a few days later, and as the road was a level one running through a plain, the troops pushed on as rapidly as possible with the intention of not making a halt until an hour before dawn. The moonlight enabled them to make almost as good progress by night as by day.

Now it so happened that the spot on which the army was to camp was a tract of luxurious grass-land through which ran an affluent of the Chambal. When Durga-Das had returned and taken up the campaign against the Emperor, he had given strict orders to all the Rajput tenants and farmers of Ajmere and Mairwara that none of them were to continue to occupy their villages, but that all must abandon their homesteads and seek refuge in the hills with the patriots who had assembled there. The punishment for disobedience was so terrible and so summary that it was rare to find any *Kunbi, gola* or *Gowali* sojourning in these vast and fertile plains. The Moghul garrisons in the towns found it next to impossible to get any supplies locally, and they were chiefly maintained by provisions sent from Agra or Delhi, if and when these were able to reach the forts without being looted on the way.

So essential was it to Durga-Das that this state of affairs should continue, that it was often his practice to ride out with only half-a-dozen men at his back to all the fertile parts of the country to find out by a surprise visit if any one had dared to disobey him. It so happened that on the very night when Shafi Khan was moving towards Bewar with his force, Durga had arrived at that particular Oasis in the course of his patrol. In the bright moonlight either-

bank of the meandering rivulet was clearly visible, and, to the intense annoyance of Durga, he and his men beheld a large flock of sheep herded for the night on both the slopes. A hastily improvised hut stood on the right bank, and through the rough bamboo-made shutter which served as a door they could see the rays of a dim oil lamp piercing the heavy shadow cast by a huge *sal* tree beside the hut. The Rahtore General rode up to the hut ahead of his men, and, alighting from his steed, kicked aside the flimsy shutter and went in with his sword drawn. Three stalwart men—one of them a Bhil—sprang up from their seats, grasping at their spears; but when they looked closely on the intruder, the foremost man sank to his knees at once and begged Durga to spare his life and that of his son and servant, and not punish them for having stolen away from the hills to this pasture to save his starving sheep! Even as he was wailing thus, the other Rahtores arrived at the place and surrounded the three culprits. "Arise, dog of a Dograh!" cried Durga-Das. "When the whole of Rajwarra is starving itself to death rather than stay in its homesteads to furnish victims and resources to our enemies, shall a miserable wretch like you hanker after fattening the carcasses of a few paltry sheep?" Turning to his followers, Durga ordered them to string the Rajput up to the *sal* tree at once while the man's son and the Bhil were told to rouse the flock and march them back to the hills immediately. The Dograh continued his entreaties and protests against his fate, and, as a last resource, he blustered out that he was after all a Mewautee, not bound to carry out the behests of a Jhōdani,

"Enough!" exclaimed Singram the Salumbra. "The Maharana is dallying with Kamala at Jayasamund, and Durga-Das the Rahtore is now lord over all Madhya-dcs." As he spoke, he plucked at the heavy turban on the head of the rebel, and to every one's surprise a neatly-folded *takced* (message) fluttered from it on to the floor. Quickly picking this up, the Salumbra ran his eyes over it, read the contents out to Durga-Das, who was greatly astonished at what it revealed. The note told the Dograh farmer that he was to contrive to escape from the Rahtore retreat with his sheep, and that on this particular night he was to encamp at this Oasis with his flock, as the new Hakim of Ajmere would arrive there about dawn with a large flying column, on the way to capture Durga-Das and Prince Ajit. The sheep would serve to appease the hunger of the army, and, when the column returned victorious, great would be the reward of the Dograh and his son. The writer of the *takced* signed himself as the Dogra's affectionate cousin Sobhan Singh, Karkoon of His Excellency Shafi Khan! The note was dated five days previously.

With Durga-Das to think was to act. He commanded his men to conceal themselves and their steeds in a dip in the river-bed overgrown with bushes. Two of them were told to ride hard to the camp near the foot-hills and summon Ajit and the Keechee brothers with about five hundred Rahtores. This contingent was to set off at once and lie in ambush at a *jheel* five miles to the east of Bewar, awaiting further orders from him in person. Durga next turned to

the Dograh and whispered to him what he was to do, if he wished to save his life, when the Hakim and his force arrived on the spot. He himself, Ram Singh the Kumpawat, and Sangram Salumbra all changed their clothes and altered their appearance so as to pass for *Gowalis*, and as it was now past midnight, they lay down to rest.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Discomfiture of Shafi.

To Ram Singh and Durga-Das sleep was an obedient handmaid, and no sooner had they laid their heads down than they were wrapped in her dark mantle. Fear and anxiety would not allow the Dograh to rest, however, so that the Salumbra was likewise compelled to stay awake in order to keep watch over him. It was therefore with some relief that Sangram heard, towards daybreak, the sound of advancing cavalry. Taking the Dograh with him, he went a few paces eastward along the road, and the two of them took their stand on a grassy knoll awaiting the passage of the Khan and his men.

"Forget not, friend," hissed the Sessodia, "that I am your son, and that two of our dependants are looking after our flocks."

"But, Thakur," cried the Dograh, "my cousin will—."

"Oh, leave your cousin to me," rejoined Sangram. "I will take him to one side for a little private talk. 'Tis long since I met Kakaji."

Even as they were talking thus, a number of horsemen issued out of the haze preceding the dawn, and surrounded the two Rajputs, asking them roughly who they were. "Friends!" cried the Dograh, "Friends, awaiting Sobhan Singh the Karkhoon!"

"He is close at hand," said one of them who seemed to be in command. "Are the sheep ready, friend, for our

morning meal?" Then, without giving the Dograh time to reply, the newcomers took both men back along the road towards an on-coming group dominated by a tall figure in the centre. Pushing the Rajputs before them, the horsemen approached this figure and halted with low salaams.

"What is it, men, and whom have you brought before me?" demanded Shafi Khan, for it was he, with his chief officers about him. "These are two Rajputs, Huzur, whom we found standing on yon knoll," replied the spokesman of the party.

By this time day had broken, and faces could be clearly seen. Sobhan Singh recognised his cousin the Dograh, and told the Khan that one of the Rajputs before them was the relation of whom he had already spoken.

"Good", cried the Hakim. "Have you the sheep and other provisions ready, friend, and have you seen to it that our enemies are encamped in the same place?"

"Pardon, Huzur," said the Dograh. "I carried out all my duties even as directed by my cousin, but the accursed Durga made a raid on me over-night with about a hundred men and marched away with the sheep. I still have in my hut the sacks of flour I purchased from the villages on my way. I and my son here, and the two servants I have brought with me, hid ourselves on seeing the Rahtores, and we have been awaiting your Excellency's approach to beg your aid in recovering the flocks!"

While the Dograh was speaking thus, the Salumbra moved quietly to where the bewildered Karkoon was taying, and addressing him as Kakaji, led him some distance

away from the others, and whispered to him. "If you value your life, heed what I say. Your treachery to the Rahtores has been found out, and dire punishment awaits you at Durga's hands. I will try to save you, but only on condition that you keep silence and refrain from interfering, whatever happens. Remember I have my eyes on you, and the moment I see the least attempt at treachery, you will fall by my hand, no matter what my own fate may be next moment." Both men then rejoined the others, and the Salumbra had the satisfaction of witnessing the rage and chagrin of Shafi Khan on learning of Durga-Das's audacious capture of the provender meant for his forces.

By this time the whole plain had become thronged with the remainder of the cavalry and the advance columns of the foot soldiers. The section commanders came to where the Khan stood and, saluting, asked for orders for pitching camp. "Settle yourselves as best as you may" exclaimed the Hakim. "The accursed Durga has walked away, it seems, with the sheep that were meant for us. This wretch of a Dograh tells me there are a few sacks of flour left untouched. See what you can do with them." So saying, he told the Dograh to lead the way to his hut.

In the meanwhile Durga-Das and Ram Singh had wakened from their slumbers and, coming out of the hut, beheld the plain about them dotted with shouting and gesticulating soldiery. Not seeing the Dograh in the place where his pallet was spread, Durga's first thoughts were that treachery was in the air, but Ram Singh pointed out that Sangram also was absent. While they stood conversing

thus, a group of horsemen approached them, with three Rajputs on foot, Sangram, the Dograh, and a stranger. As the party came near, Durga and his friend edged back into the shadow of the *Sal* tree. The Khan and his captains alighted at the hut, and Shafi Khan told the Dograh to call on his servitors to carry the sacks from inside the hut to where the soldiery were disposing themselves in groups on the river bank. Durga and Ram Singh came from under the tree and began to hoist the sacks on their backs. Shafi's eyes alighted on the stalwart Rahtore, and something in his demeanour attracted his attention. He called the man to him and asked him from what part of Rajasthan he hailed. Then he said, "You are a sturdy fellow. How is it you and the others made no attempt to resist the Rahtores' raid? I see no wounds on any of you."

"Huzur," Durga replied in humble tones, "the Rahtores were many, and the surprise was complete. It was as much as we could do to run and save our skins."

"But did not your master know that we were on our way hither," asked Shafi Khan, "and did he not tell you to hold out for a few hours?"

"Nay, Huzur," said Durga. "The mere mention of Durga's name made our master tremble, and he told us to hide or we were dead men."

"Well, what is past is past," said Shafi Khan. "Do you know where we could come upon the thieving Rahtores if we took up the pursuit now?"

Durga pretended to think for a moment, then said: "Huzur, the thieves have no knowledge of the Bahadur's

coming, and so would proceed slowly in the direction of the foot-hills. The army can well rest here till the sun leans to the west, and then a rapid march of the horsemen ought to bring them face to face with the marauders about sun set."

"Good!" said Shafi Khan. "See to it that you two set out on the path even now and meet us half-way in the afternoon with definite news."

Thus dismissed, Durga-Das and the Kampawat made a sign to the Salumbra, who understood what was meant and took the Dograh with him, and the four went down to the river bank in close converse. All along the bank there were innumerable soldiers of Shafi's army, some enjoying a bathe and others receiving and unpacking provisions for the morning meal. Durga-Das led his friends opposite the bend in the river where on an island covered with shrubs their men were hiding with the horses. The four of them entered the water, and, as though enjoying a swim, made their way to the bushes. From there it did not take long for the whole party to cross over to the other bank under cover of the dense foliage. The Dograh, his son, and the Bhil were made to mount beside three of Durga's men, and the whole party went off at a mad gallop towards Bewar.

* * * * *

It was an hour before sunset when the pursuing cavalry of Shafi Khan were riding along a huge tank bund studded with palms. The Hakim was sore troubled in mind; the Dograh and his men had escaped in the morning, and now the scouts he had sent out in advance on commencing his

march had so far failed to come back to him with information. He was trying to find the explanation of all that had happened, as he galloped along, when a sudden shout arose from his followers, and a veritable avalanche of his enemies loosed itself upon him and his men. With hoarse yells of "Ajit-Ki-Jai", "Durga-Das-Ki-Jai," a band of Rajputs with glittering swords fell upon the long-drawn column of his cavalry, and before he could think of organising his defence, the surprise became a rout. Two stalwart spearmen caught hold of his plunging animal, and in front of him he saw the dreaded Durga-Das, wiping his reddened sword. A sturdy stripling also on horseback was behind the Rahtore. Prince Ajit was then in his fifteenth year, and his frank, engaging countenance, lit by large lustrous eyes, belied the strength and swiftness of his arm when swords were drawn. The Keechee Mokund Singh had been his tutor ever since he was five years old, and never had tutor an apter pupil whether in wielding the *tulwar*, handling the dagger, or levelling the spear at a galloping foe.

When Durga's men arrived early that morning with their Chief's message asking for five-hundred Rajputs for the purposes of an ambuscade, Ajit and Tej Singh, the Rahtore's son, had succeeded in storming the citadel of Bewar. Leaving the fortress in charge of Udhaya the Jodawat, Ajit hastened to the *jheel* along with the two Keechee brothers, leaving orders that the garrison were to remain under arms in case a retreat was forced on them. But Durga's ambush had been a complete success, and it only remained for them to discuss what they should do to

meet the main body of the infantry that was pushing on from the rear. Durga-Das made light of this difficulty, for he said that their prisoner would be their guarantee against a further attack by the enemy. His prophecy proved correct. When the enemy arrived in force at about midnight, Durga coolly went up to their leaders and told them that if they were wise they would return, and he would send their General with them; if, on the other hand, they insisted on fighting, the lives of the Hakim and his friends would become forfeit to the Rahtores, who were even then guarding them close in their main camp.

"But, Rahtore," said one of the leaders addressed, "what makes you offer to send back a prisoner who is a noble of the highest rank? Such a proposal makes us think that there is something behind it, and we do not know how far we may trust you."

"Captain," said Durga-Das, "we Rajputs are not revengeful except when driven to extremes. Our object in capturing your General was to show your master the Emperor that the insane policy he is pursuing towards us is doomed to failure and sure to involve him in disaster. All we want is to be let alone in Rajwarra, and we are fighting solely for that end. Ajmere also will fall before us one of these days, but it will be by a clean fight under its walls, and not by any stroke of treachery. Do not hesitate, but say the word, and your Hakim goes back with you to Nasarabad. Time presses. What say you?"

The men were far away from their base, their morning meal had been a sorry affair, the country round them was a

waste, and a fight with the invincible Durga-Das was more than they cared to contemplate. They therefore agreed to withdraw with their captured General. Durga returned to his men and had the Khan brought before him. When he had given him some sound advice as to his mistake in underestimating Rahtore valour, he sent him and his men on their own horses to the enemy's camp. Shafi Khan departed with surly looks, vowing vengeance on Durga-Das.

CHAPTER XVII.

Shafi's Second Attempt.

We have already said that the Emperor had crowned as Rana of Jodhpur one Udhayadit, a distant relation of the late Jaswant Singh. Under the newly-acquired name of Muhammad Ali, this young man, whom the wits called the Motah Raja, set out one day from Agra to his capital, Jodhpur. Two thousand picked soldiers of the Emperor accompanied him under the leadership of Zalim Khan, with instructions that the Rahtores should be welcomed with open arms if they showed an inclination to desert Ajit, and that with their aid both Ajit and Durga-Das were to be destroyed without compunction. The Motah Raja would be a mere figure-head, and the country was to be ruled by Imperial Wazirs in the interests of the Empire. Scarcely had Shafi Khan returned to Ajmere, soured by his defeat, when news was brought to him that the new Rana of Jodhpur was on his way to the capital and that he might reach Ajmere at any moment for a short halt. Aurangzebe's diplomacy was an open book to Shafi, and he understood only too clearly that this second string to the Padishah's bow meant that his own powers were no longer considered adequate. He even expected to receive a definite letter of dismissal and recall from the hands of the approaching Rana. What was he to do to preserve his prestige? By dint of hard thinking, he hit upon a plan. Bewar had

fallen, and Durga and his Rahtores had established themselves in the citadel. If Shafi could tempt him and Ajit to set out towards Ajmere, and if the Motah Raja arrived at Ajmere in time and could be prevailed upon to start soon on his onward journey *via* Bewar, the two opposing forces were sure to meet half-way and cripple each other effectively. Then would come Shafi's chance to capture the dreaded Rahtore General, and once he was taken the Emperor's anger was sure to evaporate, and he would shower honours of every kind on his enemy's captor. The idea appealed to Shafi so strongly that he lost no time in putting it into execution. He summoned to his presence the very Karkoon who had played so sorry a part in the recent affair, and he told him that if he carried out successfully the task he was about to impose on him, he would overlook his past blunder and reinstate him in his favour. Sobhan Singh protested that he would not fail this time, come what might. "It is nothing very formidable, Sobhan," said the Khan. "I only want you to take a few of our men and proceed rapidly to Bewar under a flag of truce, and there deliver into Durga's own hands a *Khareeta* which I will give you. You are to present it, saying that it was penned at the dictation of the Emperor himself, and that the honours mentioned in it have arrived and are awaiting bestowal on the General and the Prince—nothing more."

Sobhan departed next morning for Bewar, accompanied by about a score of men and two richly-caparisoned horses and an elephant as advance tokens of good-will towards the Rahtores. He arrived at Bewar in due course

and was readily admitted into the fortress by Udhaya-bhan, especially as the Karkoon came under an emblem of peace. To his enquiries as to where Durga could be found, the wily Jodawat answered that the General and Prince Ajit had gone several days before down the ghats to the western front, but that if the *Kharecta* was entrusted to him, he would forward it by trusty messengers, and that till then the envoy could make himself comfortable in the town just outside the citadel. Sobhan Singh hesitated at first and suggested that he should accompany the messengers, for his orders were that none but he should hand over the document to Durga. But the Jodawat laughed in his face and told him he was not fool enough to let the enemy know all about their strength by adopting any such suggestion. So Sobhan had to hand over the communication to Udhaya and to accept his hospitality for a couple of days. Meanwhile, Udhaya carried the *Kharecta* to Durga-Das, who, with Ajit by his side, opened the silken bag containing the supposed Royal missive, and found in it in intimation from Shafi Khan that His Imperial Majesty had great pleasure in offering Prince Ajit and the Rahtore General each a *Panch-Hazari* (command of 5,000 horsemen) on the one condition that they recognised the Emperor's choice of Udhayadit as the Rana of the Marwaris. If they agreed, they were to repair forthwith to Ajmere to receive the *Khillats* of his august master from Shafi's own hands, for so ran the Padishah's orders. The reading finished, Durga burst into uproarious laughter at the stupidity of the Hakim in thinking that he, Durga-Das, was so raw a novice as to be

imposed upon by a ruse like this. "Heerasal!" he cried, and there stood before him, bowing respectfully, a wiry Bhi'. "How far did you say Motah Raja was from Ajmere when you left his camp?"

"He had been encamped on the banks of Bhan-Ganga for about a week, and the talk was that he would strike his tents on the day after I left—six days ago."

"Well," mused Durga-Das, aloud, "he must have arrived at Ajmere by this time, and it is such a good place for wine and women, the two things the fool understands best, that we may count upon his staying there for at least another week. The Khan is evidently gambling on his ability to send Motah off in time to meet us if we are such fools as to march trustingly towards Ajmere."

Durga then fell into deep thought, and having arrived at a decision, he summoned to his side Kurma Singh, his cousin, and commanded him to take with him five hundred Bhils under the orders of Sajjan and Heera, and to post them in the jungles surrounding Ajmere. They were to observe carefully what the Khan did as regards placing an ambush in that belt of jungle, and send instant word to Durga on his way towards Ajmere. He then called to council Prince Ajit, Mokund-Das Champawat, Singram the Salumbra and the Keechee brothers, and having clearly explained his plans, asked them what they thought of them.

"Thakurji," said Singram, "you propose that all the twenty thousand of us should march at once on Ajmere. I doubt not but that we could capture the place easily. But can we afford to tie up our forces by leaving a garrison to

defend it? Jodhpur, Mairtea, Pali, Sojot, Sewanon—all these fortresses are still under Imperial control. Should not our first step be to free Marwar before we think of burdening ourselves with Ajmere?"

"You do not understand my proposals," said Durga. "What I intend is that we should strike a blow, swift and sure, at the combined armies of Motah and the Hakim, and after proving to the latter his total inability to deceive us, restore the place to him. As for Motah——"

"As for Motah," Udhaya broke in, "Thakurji will, as a favour, leave the disposal of that illustrious Rana to my humble self!"

Durga laughed and replied, "Yes, Jodawat, do as you please with our true Rana; only do not expose him to 'Highland Justice,' for if you do, Madar Yogi will come down on us once and for all!"

"No, no, Thakurji," Udhaya assured him, "the high and mighty Rana will meet with quite another kind of justice, suited to his size and shape."

Mokund Das now put in a suggestion. "Thakur," he said, "why not wait somewhere on the road for the enemy to come out, and then deal with them, instead of risking ourselves against such a strong fortress as Ajmere? After all, you say our object is not to occupy the citadel."

Durga answered, "you forget, Champa, that the wily Hakim will not risk *his* men outside his gate. His object is to see that Prince Ajit and myself, who, he believes, will come attended by only a ceremonial escort, are met and crushed by the veterans accompanying the Motah Raja.

Though we may be able to defeat this fool and his Imperial bodyguard, the Hakim will have had time to strengthen himself further. My plan is to deal both of them a sudden and stunning blow in their own stronghold, and thus create a situation which will leave us free to advance early into Marwar with all our available resources."

Prince Ajit, who, though a boy, had already developed a remarkable aptitude for strategy, approved of his great benefactor's idea, and he brought the conference to a close by suggesting to Durgā-Das that he should send a conciliatory reply through the Karkoon to the effect that the Khan might expect to see both of them at Ajmere at an early date to receive the Imperial *Khillat*.

CHAPTER XVIII.

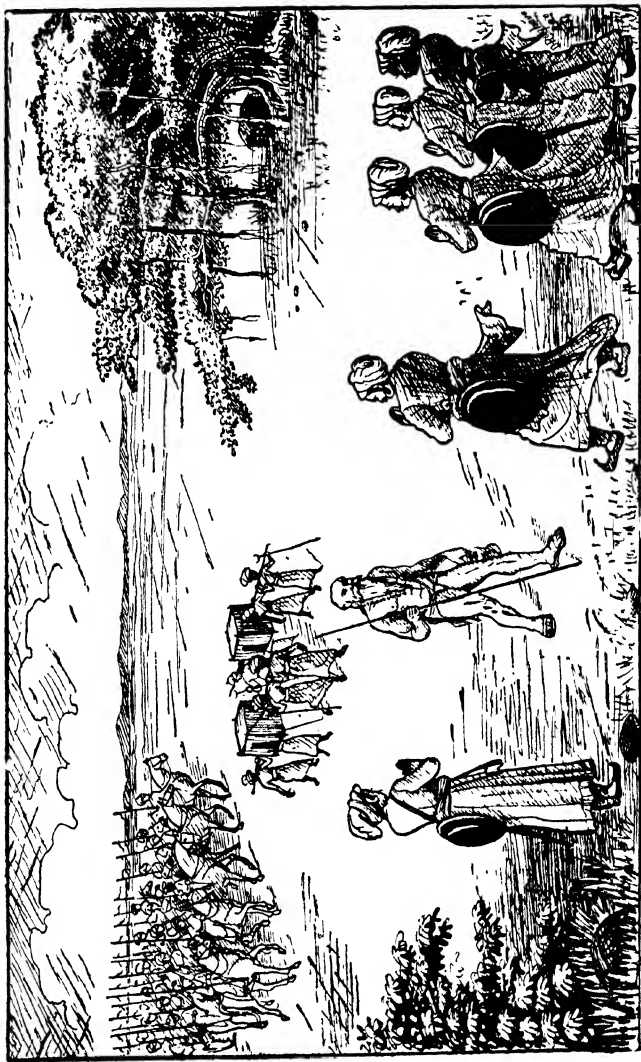
Princess Roshinara.

It was to Prince Ajit that Durga-Das owed the idea of visiting the Hakim of Ajmere with all the twenty thousand Rajputs that were then in Mairwara. The Prince pointed out to his guardian that, in case of an ambush on the way, the four thousand men originally appointed for the humbling of the Khan, excluding the five hundred Bhils, might be compelled to expend their strength in self-defence rather than on an advance, but that with the whole army behind them, they would be almost sure to overwhelm the combined forces of both the Khan and Motah Raja.

While preparations were on foot for the movement of this large body of men, word was brought to Durga that the honoured Madar Yogi was on his way to the camp, accompanied by two palanquins and about three hundred horsemen. Surprised at this unexpected visit from the sage, whom he thought safe at Dhruva-nagar, Durga hastened to welcome the holy man and his party. Ajit, Tej Singh, and the Keechee brothers also accompanied their General. The two parties met about half a mile in front of the encampment. Durga first bowed before the Yogi with folded hands, and then embraced him warrior-fashion. Close beside the hermit stood a stalwart youth, Prince Amara of Mewar, and his own Jaita the Kumpawat.

“Why, Jaita, what brings you here? Have you left—?”

PRINCESS ROSHINARA



THE TWO PARTIES MET ABOUT HALF A MILE IN FRONT OF THE ENCAMPMENT.

"Do not question him," interposed Madar Yogi. "It was I who made him come with me as an escort to Prince Akbar's wife and child. On our way we met Prince Amara with his hundred men returning from his pilgrimage to Gaya. Amara has also with him his cousin, the little Chohani Princess, the daughter of his uncle, Gaj Singh."

"But, friend," cried Durga, "I cannot understand why the Imperial family has been induced to leave the shelter of Dhruva-nagar."

"Softly, Rahtore, do not be flurried. I will explain briefly why I made them come. The Hakim Sujait of Jodhpore descended on your capital with about a thousand men, and demanded of your garrison the instant surrender of the Princess Roshinara in the Emperor's name. Well, Jaita and I made the envoy beat a rather hasty retreat back to his own place, leaving on our hill-side some four hundred of his men. Then I came to the conclusion that your citadel was no longer safe for the illustrious ladies, and, trusting in God, we decided that their place for the future was where you are."

"You have done well, my fighting Rishi," exclaimed Durga-Das. "I should have cursed myself for an impotent fool if the noble refugees had fallen into the Emperor's hands. But time presses, and we have much to do. Let the royal ladies stay in this grove till to-night, when we intend making a move northwards." So saying, he instantly ordered a couple of tents to be pitched close to a rain-fed tank beside the grove, and had all necessary provisions sent in. Then taking Princes Ajit and Amara with him, he

advanced to where Shahzada Akbar's wife and daughter were seated inside the palanquin, and, standing outside, extended his greetings with all affection and respect to the unfortunate lady, and asked her how the little Princess was getting on with her studies under the Fakir.

"Oh, the truant teases the holy man ever so much," said her mother laughing. "She would much rather steal away to the hill-side to hear the parrots talking and watch the cranes flying than sit listening to the beauties of the Koran or the *Shah Namah* of Firdausi. Ask the Sage if I am not correct." As the two were talking thus, Roshinara slyly lowered the top panel an inch, and knelt gazing at Prince Ajit. The young Prince also caught the play of a pair of laughing eyes and ruby lips, and unknown to any one he blew a kiss in the direction of the slit. Then he drew Prince Amara aside, and both wandered away from the group along the water's edge, where the young men selected a shady spot and seated themselves for a quiet chat. It was only on two previous occasions that they had met each other, and then by chance, in the midst of pressing engagements. Prince Amara was in his nineteenth year, and so four years older than Ajit. He looked also tougher and more thoughtful for a youth of his age. His quarrels with his father Maharana Jai Singh had been patched up to some extent, and for the last five years, he had lived in Jayasamund with his mother, who was still neglected by her husband in his infatuation for Kamala. The two Princes had rapidly become fast friends and were soon deep in intimate conversation.

"Well, Ajit," said Prince Amara "how goes the struggle with you Rahtores? As far as Mewar is concerned, not a single soldier of the Padishah has found a footing in Madhya-des."

"We are not so lucky as you are," Ajit replied. "Almost all our chief fortresses are still in the enemy's hands. Except Dhruva-nagar and Ahwa, we Rahtores can call none of our citadels our own. But thanks to that hero of heroes, Durga-Das, and thanks also to your brave Sessodias, the time is drawing nigh when we shall possess our homes once more."

"Soon may it come!" said Amara. "But enough of these grave matters. Tell me, Ajit, is it true that the Maharana is thinking of bestowing his niece's hand on you? If that is the case it means the end of the interdict placed on such marriages by the Royal House to which I belong."

"Some such rumours have reached my ears," said Ajit. "But as Durga-Das has not approached me directly on the matter, it evidently still rests with my guardian, my mother, and your revered father."

"Well, then, Ajit," said Amara, "You must excuse me if I take any liberties in what I am going to say. I happened just now to catch the play of lightning between two pairs of eyes. Everyone says that, though he is younger than myself, the heir of Jaswant Singh has got a very old head on his shoulders. Does not he know, then, that any advance in that particular direction would be the surest means of smattering those hopes of a union of all Rajwarra which all of us cherish to-day?"

Ajit's answer showed that his friend's warning had gone home. "Since you have brought the matter up," he said, with some heat, "why should I not follow my honest inclinations? Is there any real objection to my taking to wife a fatherless girl, even though she is of a different faith? Have not we Rajputs, to our shame be it said, been giving our daughters to aliens? I do not mean, of course, the ever-glorious sons of the Sun, the Chohans, of immortal memory. In this case both mother and daughter are in essence Rajputs, and of your own clans of Boondi. Durga-Das is neither sending them back to their natural guardian, the Emperor, nor is he allowing them to choose the path in life they prefer. Listen, Amar Singh! I met the charming little Princess Roshinara while on a visit to Dhruva-nagar a year ago. Her lovely face, her pretty ways, and her entire artlessness, captivated my heart, boy though I then was, and am still for that matter. During our secret meetings at milking time and at sunset hours, we have vowed to be true to each other come what may. Let Durga-Das take care. It is true that he has been more than a father to me, but there is a limit even to his authority."

"I never looked to hear such words from you, Ajit," said Amara seriously, "and if this is your frame of mind towards your greatest benefactor and the bravest hero in all Rajasthan, then it was an unhappy day for us when you met our leader's ward! If you persist in such a course, two things, I fear, will happen: the Emperor will be seized with such a hatred for the very name of Rajput that I dare not think of the future peril to the whole of Rajwarra; secondly, all

my Sessodias, and many of your Rahtores also, will desert your standard, and will prevail on Durga-Das either to supplant you or else go over to the Padishah. Looked at from any point of view, your resolve is suicidal, and, speaking as your friend, I entreat you to put it from your mind without delay."

Ajit, however, was not to be moved, and the two Princes returned to their comrades in no very happy frame of mind. The sequel to their conversation belongs to a later stage in the lives of Ajit and Durga-Das, and will be related in due course.

As the evening advanced, Durga-Das decided that Prince Amara should go on his way to Jayasamund, taking Princess Roshinara and her mother with him to stay for a while with his own mother and the mother of Prince Ajit, who for the past two years had been spending her time alternately at Udaipur and Jayasamund. He assigned them a chosen guard of a thousand Rajputs and eight hundred Meenas, who had strict orders to perish to the last man rather than allow the illustrious refugees to fall into the enemy's hands. Durga next turned his attention to his onward march against Ajmere. The plan settled upon was that a rapid advance should be made directly to the north till the lonely *Nag-pahad* (the Serpent Hill) was reached. On the top of this hill lay the ruins of the first citadel set up by Ajapal, the Chohan shepherd of ancient days. There the army was to halt, and make their further arrangements for the attack upon modern Ajmere up the valley.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Treasure Chest of Manick Rai.

Early on the following day the compact body of about eighteen thousand men, under the command of Durga-Das and other prominent leaders, commenced their march due north to Pushkar along the eastern fringe of the Aravallis. Durga-Das, Singram the Salumbra, Jaita the Jodawat, and the inseparable Ram Singh Kumpawat, and last but not least, the gaunt ascetic of Mount Abu, Madar Yogi, rode in front; Prince Ajit, Tej Singh Kurnote, Kurma Singh, his uncle, and the Keechee brothers, Shiv Singh and Mokund, occupied the centre; while the rear was guarded by other Rahtores and Sessodias of note, the Shantanu Thakur being a conspicuous figure among the latter. Sujun, the Chief of the Bhils, and Udhaya the Jodawat preceded the main body with about a thousand veteran archers of the hills. Their orders were to push on and to pick up Heerasal or his scouts and learn of the enemy's dispositions, and then double back to report. On the sixth day, late in the afternoon, as the crest of the solitary Nag-pahad loomed gradually into view, Sujun and Heera both rode up to the vanguard of the army, and the latter told Durga that on the previous day the Hakim had despatched a force of five thousand men with orders to lie in hiding on the northern flank of the sacred mount. Their object, Heera continued, was to fall on the force of two thousand men which the Khan imagined

would attend Prince Ajit and Durga-Das, and to contrive, if possible, to capture both and take them as prisoners before the Khan and the Motah Raja. At present, added the Bhil, the so-called Rana of Jodhpur was in occupation of the western flank of the fortress of Aja-gir, close beside the famous Adai-din-Ka Jopadi (Mantap built in two and a half days), boasting that Ajit and Durga should go up to meet the Khan only after tendering their obeisance to him first.

"Do not waste words on the fool," said Durga, "but tell me how the five thousand ambushers are disposed. Are they in mass, or in extended formation along the valley?"

"That I do not know for certain. My information is not later than last night. Three of my scouts were caught this morning by their outposts, and they have not returned—probably never will. None of us has ventured near. What I have told you is the result of a gentle pressure we exerted on one of their soldiers whom we caught straggling behind in the swamp to the east."

Durga's dispositions were soon made. He commanded the Bhil Chiefs to go back, and they and Udhaya were to silence the outposts posted at the southern base, in the gathering darkness of the night. Then their combined forces of one thousand five hundred hillmen were to form an extended line slightly to the east of the ascent, and remain on the look-out for reliefs to the pickets. Durga would then lead his main body silently up the heights to where the ruins lay, and after a few hours' brief rest, the whole force would descend about daybreak down the

northern slopes and make short work of the ambushers. As soon as the main body were safe on the heights, Udhaya and all the Bhils were to push on farther north to the head of the valley by a circuitous route in order to intercept those who sought to escape to Ajmere from the projected carnage.

The plan thus drawn up to the last detail by Durga worked out with remarkable accuracy. The Khan's men took up their quarters in the rugged foot-hills and *tecbas* (sand-mounds) at the northern base, and, feeling confident of obtaining timely information as to the arrival of the Rajputs through their outposts, they gave themselves up to the pleasure of a careless bivouac. Not one of them dreamt that Durga would come with any large body of troops, or that he would resolve on gaining a respite for his men by pitching camp on the very heights of the dread, ghost-haunted Serpent Mount. To tell the truth, Durga himself would have preferred not to halt on this hill, which, tradition averred, was not propitious to the shepherd ancestor of the Chohans of Ajmere. But its caves and waterfalls were unique features of this solitary mount, and many a *Vanaprasth* (householder become hermit) had made these cool grottos his ideal ashrams to the end of his life. Madar Yogi told Durga-Das at the very outset that it would be of advantage to the expedition if, instead of halting elsewhere, the camp was pitched amidst the ruins on the Serpent Hill. Knowing well that the Fakir never spoke at random, Durga had agreed.

It was near midnight when the Rajputs climbed up to the weird-looking plateau. Madar Yogi at once went

away into the darkness and returned a couple of hours later with another hermit. Both signed to Durga and Ram Singh to follow them with about half a dozen men with torches. The party traversed the ruins briskly and arrived at the extreme western end. In a small chamber chock-full of fallen stones and fetid plant life, the two ascetics halted, and Madar Yogi signed to the six men to fix up their torches in the crevices of the walls, and begin lustily on the task of removing the debris from the centre. After half an hour's exertion, a circular stone with a ring of iron in the middle came into view. Madar told the men to insert a crowbar through the ring and to lift the stone lid. After a good deal of tugging, pulling, and straining, the cover slowly yielded and rose into the air. Telling the men to hold it open, he asked for two of the torches to be held at the mouth. Every one closed around the orifice and peered into the mysterious depths below. Rough stone shelves ran all round the cellar in double tiers. On them stood arranged in compact order idols of gold and silver, many-beaked lamps of the same metals, vessels of worship, and so on. There were also many brass-bound boxes, both brass and wood mottled and mildewed. In the very centre of the cellar stood another big box about four and a half feet square. Allowing enough time for the foul air to clear, Madar Yogi told the men to remove everything that stood upon the shelves, but when they approached the big box in the centre, he commanded them to leave it alone. The stone cover of the cellar was then replaced as before, and the debris once more heaped on it and all around. Madar

told the six men that the matter was not one they should talk about to others, and that they were not to make any further exploration on their own account. "Simply do your duty," said he, "and carry these things quietly piece by piece to Durga's tent, and then go your ways. If you are questioned by the men who saw us hurrying this way, tell them the affair does not concern them."

It was then that Madar Yogi told the surprised Rahtore General that these were the treasures of the great, the immortal Manick Rai, who a thousand years ago opposed with all his might the first rush of the followers of Islam, and, finding his efforts vain and his end approaching, had these treasures conveyed secretly from Aja-garh to this mount, on which in his days the first fortress of the first Chohan in Hindustan still stood intact. "If you are curious to know," continued the Fakir, "how I came to hear of it, and why I kept it a secret from any one till now—well, those are matters which we will discuss another time. But you will realise that from henceforth it ought not to be hard for you to wrest Marut-des from the usurper within a brief space of time."

By this time the rosy fingers of the dawn had brightened the silent east, and Durga-Das at once ordered his men to swoop down on the foe. Two hours after sunrise, the terrific carnage was almost ended, four thousand of the enemy and nearly seven hundred of the attackers having perished in the struggle. About eight hundred of the ambushers who threw away their arms were given their lives, and after being disarmed, were permitted by Durga-Das to go

away, but not to Ajmere. The exhausted Rajputs—for the enemy were no easy prey—sought a respite for a few hours amidst the foot-hills, and were joined at the close of the day by Udhaya and the Bhils,—driving before them about two hundred prisoners, literally the captives of their bow.

CHAPTER XX.

The Worship of the Mother.

All night the Rajputs stayed on the sides of the sacred hill, and it was decided that early next day Prince Ajit and Durga-Das should continue their march to Ajmere with about two thousand men, while the rest followed after a few hours' interval. The distance was only about six miles, and from their present encampment, Aja-giri could be seen clearly over the intervening plain enclosing within its sandy bosom the beautiful sheet of water known as Bisal Dewa's *talav* (*lake*). While the details of the march were being discussed, our old friend Udhaya-Bhan rose with two requests which he said the Prince and Durga should grant him, and through him all the men assembled.

"Out with them, restless one," said the General, laughing. "One of your requests I can guess, but what may the other be? We will grant you anything you wish provided it does not delay us unduly on our way."

"So be it, O Beloved of the lions!" replied Udhaya. "My first request is that I and a few hundred of the Bhils shall be permitted to precede you to the Khan's fortress, so that we may prepare both the Motah Raja and the Hakim to receive our Raj Rajeshwar properly. My second is that, having come so far, it is but meet that we sons of the Sun and the Moon and those that have sprung from Indra's bone (Rahtores) should pay our humble worship to the ancient

Amba-Mata who sits enshrined on the top of Nandagiri, separated from us towards the north by only a few *teebas* (sand-mounds). All the men desire it, especially as the Devi has vouchsafed to us the victory of this morning. As for any difficulty concerning the lack of women to perform the first dance before the Mother, our friend the Shantanu Thakur has just revealed to me the fact that his irrepressible daughter with twenty of her maids and friends is with the contingent he has brought with him. She and her friends are all attired as men, and the Thakur tells me he simply could not prevent the Chohani from joining the army. I propose, therefore, that we move tomorrow to Nanda-parbhat and worship the Devi in the evening, obtain her blessings, and then leave for Ajmere early next morning. I have spoken."

The information that the Shantanu maiden was even then in their midst with her maids all attired as males, took both Durga and Prince Ajit by surprise, and the former sent at once for father and daughter. When they arrived, the girl, who had hastily dressed in women's clothes, approached the General, bowed low, and stood there with downcast eyes. "What, then, my daughter!" cried Durga, "will you never give up this hoydenish bent of yours? Of course, we have all heard of your many exploits in defence of your mountain-home in the absence of your father, whether with sword, lance or bow. But this ruse of yours to take part in our attack on Ajmere surpasses them all. Well, child, now that you are here, there is nothing to be gained by scolding you. Only assist us tomorrow in the worship,

and then continue to follow us if you will, but not in the guise of men. Do you understand?" The brave damsel merely bowed her head in reply and retired to her tent.

THE SONG OF THE MOTHER.

It was evening. In front of the small shrine dedicated to Amba Devi, on the top of Nandagiri, thousands of men stood gathered behind a knot of a hundred Rajputs all clad in saffron robes. In advance of these hundred men stood a score of strong-limbed damsels, also saffron-clad. Several priests stood at the altar of the Goddess, who in this temple was worshipped as Iswari of a benign mien. No animal sacrifice was ever offered her, but only fruits, cooked rice, and coconuts. All these stood heaped on numerous trays in front of the deity. The worship commenced with a blare of trumpets, the boom of the *nakarra*, and the shrill notes of many conches. After the waving of many lights and the burning of camphor, the priests ordered the instruments to stop. Then there arose on the night air sweet sounds from human voices and twelve women took slow steps towards the very foot-stool of the Goddess, sounding low pleading notes on tiny shells; nine other women sang, also in a low key, keeping time with their hands. After they had gone round the image thrice in this fashion, they retired to a corner of the sanctuary, and the saffron-robed warriors divided themselves into two parties of fifty ranged opposite each other. Then lifting their voices to a high but pleasing pitch, they sang the following song, each man keeping time by advancing alternately one foot and one arm with its lifted sword

III.

Sorrow not, O Mother! Thy suffering unnerves
us men,
And Thy long-drawn wailing makes us weak.
In the awakened gladness of the World, O
Mother,
Let smiles irradiate Thy Face—wrapped till now
in gloom!

Chorus :—

Awake, O Motherland. . . .

So sang the doughty Rajputs, and danced their passionate dance. When the last notes of the last chorus rose into the starlit sky, the whole mighty mass of warriors made their final obeisance to the Goddess and retired for the repose of the night.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Dancer and the Astrologer.

Let us leave the Rajputs well on their way to Ajmere, but moving at a leisurely pace, as Udhaya-bhan had preceded them with a number of Bhils and two hundred Jodas headed by Jaita and Mokund Singh the Keechee. Durga would fain have pushed on in a body; but Udhaya pleaded so hard that he should be allowed to try and capture the rival Rana that neither he nor Prince Ajit had the heart to say him nay.

At Ajmere, the news of the destruction of the force he had sent against the Rajputs reached the Khan the same day, and the fact that Durga had found out his treachery did not add to his peace of mind. Including the two thousand veterans of Motah Raja, Shafi still had in the town and the citadel ten thousand effective fighting units. But knowing Durga as he did, how was he to rely on the loyalty of the three thousand Harrawats and others whom his army comprised? During the eight years or so that the great Karnasuta had been leading the Rajputs, after his return from the Deccan, there had not been a single encounter in which Durga figured where there had not been some desertion to his banner on the part of the Rajput element in the Imperial army. Often the Rahtore hero had tried to drive back these doubtful allies, but they would fall at his feet and beg to be accepted, saying that otherwise they would commit *Agnipravesha* (self-immolation by fire).

Throughout Rajasthan, nay, throughout the length and breadth of Hindustan itself and even beyond, Durga-Das's name was one to conjure with wherever valour, unselfishness and magnanimity were held in admiration.

While the Khan was debating with his captains as to the next steps to be taken, Muhammad Khan, as Udhyadit styled himself, laughed away the Hakim's fears by telling him that he and his two thousand chosen men would receive the advancing Rahtores at Roshan Mahal on the edge of the Dharia-el-Khayr (The ocean of Prosperity), which was how Jehangir had renamed Bisaldeva's beautiful lake. Their consultation took place on the very night of the surprise attack at Naga-pahad, and early next morning Motah moved from the Adai-din-ka-Jopadi on the hill to Roshan Mahal. Arrived there, the vain youth told his men to disperse and enjoy themselves after setting outposts along the route from the West. The day passed thus, and the next day dawned. It was springtime, and the Holi festival had just commenced. Motah made himself comfortable in the magnificent marble hall of Roshan Mahal, and a number of his boon companions surrounded him, waited upon by a score of beautiful damsels. A space was cleared in front of the pseudo-Prince, and two young Rajputnis of rare beauty, who had just offered to entertain the Raj Rajeshwar Sultan Bahadur, and who, his men said, had only just arrived in the city from Nagore, danced in turn to the music of their troupe—a set of five wiry-looking *gawais* (singers).

When the merriment was at its highest, wine and sweetmeats going their rounds gaily, word was brought to the

bemused usurper that a great Jyotish (astrologer) craved audience of the Sultan. "Bravo," cried Motah, "the more the merrier; and the Shaitan of a *Ruhani* (fortune-teller) shall tell me at once of my coming fortune. Ask him to come in." His men then ushered into the presence the Jyotish, a keen-eyed, thick-set man with knotted arms and the neck of a bull. He was followed by two of his *Chelas*, tall, muscular figures, by no means suited to carrying cadjan tomes or betel boxes. The dance was stopped for a while, and if any one had watched one of the two dancers keenly, he would have seen her exchanging covert glances with the taller of the two *Chelas*. Slowly the man made his way to where she stood and whispered something into her ear. Meanwhile the reader of the stars approached the would-be Rana, asked him to extend his right palm, and pretended to scrutinise it closely. Suddenly, the grip on the arm tightened, the astrologer drew from the fold of his turban a keen, short-bladed dagger, and the point was at the throat of the astounded Motah before he could move even an inch from his seat. Simultaneously, Jaita and Mokund, who were the two *Chelas*, drew their swords from inside their loose-flowing *joobbas* (tunics) and drove the revellers towards the wall. They were flanked on either side by the two dancers, one of whom was Rupmani and the other her cousin, who had in their hands deadly-looking dirks which they kept pointed at the men. The other damsels also produced similar weapons from their garments while the five musicians sprang to the entrance of the hall with drawn swords! All this happened in less time than it takes to

narrate, and almost the only sound was the cry from the throat of Motah: "Treachery, treachery! To the rescue!" Throwing down the dagger, our friend Udhaya-bhan dragged the trembling debauchee from his seat, and forcing him to stand up, challenged him to a fight with any weapon he might choose, in these ringing words: "O mountain of putrid flesh! Dare you dream of sitting on the throne of Marut-des—you, the gutter-born son of a *goli* to a cousin of Jaswant? How dared you pretend, dog, in the Court of Delhi, that Prince Ajit was a foundling while you were the real son of the Lion of Jodhpur? Is there any truth, O swine of the streets, in your story that the Bhishma of Kali-Yug, Durga-Das, foisted his own unlawful babe on the unwary Chohani Queen of Maru?" Here he turned abruptly towards the men against the wall. "Men! this is a low reprobate, whom your Emperor has used as his catspaw. We Rahtores have come here first to send this son of iniquity to his own place, and then to meet your Hakim—to receive, if what he told us is true, the Imperial *Khillat*. Shafi's treachery of two days ago has taught us a lesson, and we are but paying him back in his own coin. By this time our men should have accounted for most of your two thousand comrades on the shores of the lake! Now, listen! We have no quarrel with you, and if you quietly give up your weapons and stand aside in a row, you may watch me deal out short shrift to the traitor here. Otherwise, your fates be on your own heads!"

Now, the fact was that none of those surrounding him had ever really cared for Motah, whose principal qualities

were evil ones. It was only to please the Emperor that they had agreed to follow him, and when they saw the turn affairs had taken, they were willing to take Udhaya's advice, and each man put down on the floor in front of him the weapons he had on his person. Telling Rupmani to gather them into a heap away from the men, the Jodhawat asked her to bring him two of the swords. Thrusting one into the dazed Motah's hands, Udhaya fell into position for the duel. Motah Raja, though dull-witted and slow, was not devoid of courage; and, when roused, his immense strength always made him no mean adversary to any one that offended him. On this occasion, the truth slowly penetrated into his mind that here in front of him stood one who had dashed to the ground all his fond hopes for the future. Resentment overmastered him, and he clutched the sword given him with a vicious grip, and the duel began. The vaulted hall of Jehangir never echoed to sterner sounds than those of that fateful day. Feint, parry, lunge, slash or crosscut—there was no device of the swordsman that the antagonists omitted to execute. At one time it looked as though the superior strength of Motah would carry the day. But wine and opium shortened his breath, and after quarter of an hour's sword-play, the struggle was over. Udhayadit fell to the polished marble floor with a thrust through the lungs that would have pierced the trunk of a teak tree. "So perish all traitors to Durga!" cried Udhaya-bhan, and he drew the sword out of the quivering body and cast it aside. By this time, huge shouts of "Mata-ki-Jai," "Bhavani-ki-Jai", and "Har, Har, Mahadeo!" were heard outside, and a

horde of half-clad Bhils and fully clad Rahtores swept into the Mahal. "Where is Udhaya-bhan?" "Where is Rupmani the Bold?" were the cries on the lips of the newcomers.

We must now narrate briefly what had taken place very early that day. Long before cock-crow, Udhaya-bhan, Jaita, and Mokund took their allotted men and commenced their march to Ajmere. The occurrence of the Holi festival was fortunate for the wily Udhaya. Hundreds of men would pass between Ajmere and Pushkar along Visaldeva's lake during the three days. Udhaya proposed that his thousand men should divide themselves into irregular groups of ten or fifteen. Some of them were to carry roughly constructed litters of the kind affected by the poorer people for their women-folk. Four armed men would sit inside each litter and eight Bhils would act as carriers. When they were near Ajmere they were to remain down by the edge of the water in suitable parties, leaving himself and his friends with about a couple of hundred men to proceed to Adai-din-ka-Jopadi. While everything was ready and they were about to start, Rupmani Shantanu came on the scene with her maids and said that since she was not permitted to fight any more as a man, she and her friends would accompany Udhaya to help them as women! At first the Jodawat was about to refuse, but Mokund slyly hinted that it would be well if some of the litters contained real women, and that dancing girls came in very handy when surprise attacks were intended. That settled the matter; the women were permitted to come, and on the way it was

arranged that all the women should get into the city, and gave out that they were ready to amuse during the Holi festival any nobleman who cared to patronise them. Motah Raja's guard of honour and his outposts met plenty of peasants going past them with their women-folk in litters, but no armed Rahtores.

Once past the outposts, the peasants disposed themselves all along the route, while a few men and women crossed over into the city. After some time, the soldiers of Motah, seeking for amusement, began to tease the men around the litters, asking them rudely to let them see their pretty wives and daughters. The peasants resisted, hot words led to blows, and blows led to the drawing of swords. Then, to the intense surprise of the Delhi sepoys, the litters vomited not pretty dames and damsels, but stern-faced warriors, shouting not words of love, but war-cries such as "Ajit Maharaj-ki-Jai," "Durga-Das-ki-Jai!" "Kali-Mata-ki-Jai!" The Imperial soldiers had most of them unloosened their belts and piled them on the ground, and were stripped for bathing. At the very beginning of the disturbance, some of the Bhils had quickly attached all these belts to their own persons, and against bows and arrows and flashing *tulwars*, the hapless bathers had no protection. Udhaya knew that the Motah Raja and his guard from Delhi would be found on the water's marge near Roshan Mahal and not high up in the citadel, from information carried to Naga-parbhat on the evening of the day when Udhayadit moved into the Mahal, by the Bhil spies whom Durga had despatched into Ajmere.

Durga and the main body reached Roshan Mahal in the afternoon, and all along the lake they found ample signs of the handiwork of Udhaya's Bhils. When they approached Roshan Mahal, which was only one mile from Ajmere, the Jodawat and Jaita and Mokund Singh Keechee met the oncoming warriors with the news that the newly appointed Rana of Jodhpur would trouble them no more. The young Ajit insisted on Jaita's telling him the story, and the adventure of the astrologer tickled every one's fancy. Durga espied the Shantanu maiden in the Jodawat's company, and he again chided her for exposing herself to danger so recklessly.

The march to the city was resumed, but before they had gone much further, envoys of peace arrived on the scene from the Hakim, inviting them into Aja-garh. "Hang the jackal!" cried the men. "He is utterly false and ignoble. Let us set fire to the city, and purge its streets with Ganges water!"

Durga rebuked them for such heedless words and he sent a message to the Hakim, bidding him come at once in person with suitable presents, and also with enough gold to repay what it had cost to bring twenty thousand men trudging all the way from Mairwara. If he did not do so, he would be solely responsible to God and the Emperor for what would follow. The threat had its effect, and the Chronicles say that the Hakim, trembling for his life, gave the dread Rahtore ample treasures and copious promises not to attempt any longer to defy his authority so long as he stayed in Ajmere.

CHAPTER XXII

God is One.

Though the Rajputs thus refrained from trying conclusions with the Hakim of Ajmere, this did not prevent the men from roaming all over the city and its environs, impressing on one and all the need to preserve their loyalty to the old Royal Houses of sacred Rajwarra. A party of two thousand men climbed the steep Aja-giri to enjoy the glorious view from its heights. The hill was an isolated one, some eight hundred feet high, and it was rich in associations with far-distant days, when Aryawarta was yet untrod by the foot of the invader. Hundreds of Rahtores, Sessodias and Solankis from Guzerat pressed on to the western flank of the citadel to visit leisurely the far-famed Adai-din-ka-Jopadi. Ram Singh the Champawat, Shiv Singh Keechee, our friend Udhaya and his clansman Jaita were among the chief men present in the party. Prince Ajit, Durga-Das, Tej Singh, and Madar Yogi were with another larger party that stood chatting with the Hakim's soldiery guarding the citadel.

When the first group of men approached the lofty gateway of the structure known throughout the region as the one built by genii in two and a half days, the sight of the saracenic facade with its numerous wavy-arched inlets, and the minaret to the right with steps leading up to a terrace for

the muezzin to utter his call for prayers, roused strong feelings in some of them. These structures, they said, were a sacrilege to the most ancient temple on Aji-garh, Sampathi's shrine to Mahavir. They had in mind the fact that the main building was indeed a very old Jain temple, converted into a mosque hundreds of years previous to that time by the Ghorī Sultan of Delhi, Shahbuddin. The lofty central aisle with narrower wings on either side was supported by marble columns worked all over with clear-cut panels displaying scriptural incidents familiar to every Hindu. In the rearmost compartment of this hall what was once the *sanctum sanctorum* of Mahavira had been turned into the prayer niche of the mosque. At the time of our story the vogue of this beautiful house of worship had declined, as the city itself had grown in importance since the days of Jehangir, and the citadel had ceased to enjoy its former prominence.

The sight of these innovations, though they were more than five hundred years old, awoke bitter memories in the minds of the victorious Rajputs, and with one voice they exclaimed that before they left Aja-garh, they would remove all traces of them from Sampathi's shrine. The Bhils were despatched into the town for crowbars and spades, and even before they could return, impatient warriors had begun battering the beautiful facade with whatever they could lay their hands on. Ram Singh and Jaita tried hard to make them desist, saying that they were under a truce, and if any of them broke it, their punishment at their General's hands would be quick and exemplary. Udhaya and Shiv Singh

sided, though reluctantly, with the other two leaders, and the irate Rajputs paused for a while, undecided what to do. Meanwhile some of the Bhils who went past the citadel on their way to fetch crowbars mentioned hurriedly to the Rahtores there what was happening at the western end. The news reached the ears of Durga-Das and Madar Yogi, and, deeply pained and surprised, both of them set out with determined strides towards the temple-mosque. All their men followed them, and in a short time the General and the Fakir, who had his drawn sword in his right hand, arrived on the scene. "Ram Singh," cried Durga, "what is it that I hear? Have the sons of Rajasthan forgotten so entirely their traditions? When have we in all our long-drawn struggle with our enemies ever laid violent hands on houses of worship, by whatever name men call them? Apart from this, which of you here will confess that he is unaware of the amicable settlement we have even now entered into with the Hakim of Ajmere? If such there be, let him come forth!"

Thereupon there ensued a confused hum of murmurs, and about a dozen Rajputs undertook to speak for the others. "O Thakur-bhai," they cried, "This is the most hallowed shrine in all Ajmere-des. Can you ask us to take no heed of sacrilege committed on the Mount made dear to us by the memories of Ajapal, Maneck Rai and Visal-dev? We are fighting as one man, we of the whole of Rajwarra, to free our dominions from Aurangzebe's control. Can it matter if we try to restore to its original purity this one temple?"

"It does matter, O Rajputs!" exclaimed Madar Yogi with flashing eyes. "It does matter, not only now but for all eternity! Even the meanest hovel, once it has been set apart by a few as the domicile of their gods, is a portion of Heaven, and must be respected as such. That the present Padishah has chosen to forget this truth is no excuse for any honest man to go and do likewise. All his life Aurangazebe has been but a hypocrite masking his greed under the cloak of religion. But throw back your memories to the proud line of Padishahs before him. As true Kshatriyas they invaded and subdued Hindustan—the more shame to you. Has any one of them from the illustrious Baber downwards ever insulted your creed or the symbols of your creed? Did any of those great Emperors countenance violence to the images of your Gods and the fanes that enshrined them?

"Men, you may cut me down if you so choose, but speak I will. Long is the struggle that yet lies before you, O patriots, and chance may subject to your power a hundred mosques. The memories of numberless temples desecrated and destroyed may make your hearts sore and rouse your anger—but if you ever seek a blessing from Heaven on your labours on behalf of your unhappy Motherland swear to me, O children of the Sun and the Moon, that no place of prayer, least of all a mosque, shall suffer any indignity at your hands!

"Look at me carefully, men. Very few in Rajwarra know the past of him whom ye all call the Hermit of Arbuda. You look on him as an eccentric Fakir, unsettled in mind

and habits. Well, this Madar Yogi is the long-lost Rawul Umed Singh of Kotah and Boondi, who, because of his sin in having murdered in cold blood his cousin of Indurgarh, forsook his throne, became an ascetic, and is praying night and day for forgiveness from Heaven. That is my own story, and what I wish to impress upon you is that ten years of companionship with a wise and noble teacher led me to become a follower of the Blessed Guru Nanak to whom Allah was no different from Sri Ram the Pure, both alike hating magnificent gem-set pagodas and hecatombs of sheep or buffalo blood. For the last forty years I have been leading the life of a Nanak-panthi, honouring God and His works and striving to oppose in my own humble way the ceaseless cruelties and unholy deeds of the proud Aurangazebe. From this hour, then, brave Rajputs, give up all thoughts of revenge on God's Holy Places, and continue to wrestle with your enemies as bold and righteous Kshatriyas should. Success will be yours by the Almighty's grace, and it is I, the long-suffering Sessodia Umed Singh, who assure you of it."

The magnetic personality of Madar Yogi gained a colossal prestige in the estimation of these fearless sons of Rajasthan when they recognised in him the incomparable Umed Singh of Kotah, who for twenty-five years had borne the hardest strokes of Destiny, emerging at last completely victorious over internecine intrigue, hostility and treachery, like the heroic Partab of Mewar, and who, unlike Partab, had thrown away a kingdom for conscience' sake! His ringing denunciation of intolerance found a ready echo in

their hearts, and they all crowded round him to crave his blessings, while shouts of "Madar-Yogi-ki-Jai" rent the air from a thousand throats. Through the shimmering haze that lay on the intervening hills and valleys, the setting sun shed its golden beams on the whole reverent assembly, touching with its mellow fingers the grave, set features of Durga-Das and the stern, bearded countenance of Madar Yogi slowly relapsing into its accustomed gloom.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Ajit Regains His Throne.

Our story now carries on to the year A. D. 1700. Maharana Jai Singh of Mewar breathed his last, and Amara his heir ascended the throne of the Sessodias. Prince Ajit was then in his nineteenth year, and a more gallant warrior did not exist in all Hindustan. Tall for his age, erect as a young teak tree, long-armed, slim-waisted, and broad-chested, he could hold his own in any kind of sport with the most daring cavalier of Rajasthan—Udhaya and Tej Singh not excepted. In fact one reason why the whole of Rajwarra had chosen to follow Ajit ever since he emerged from his seclusion twelve years before was that they saw in him the spirit of a lion, ready to pounce and impatient of control. After the historic march on Ajmere recounted in the preceding chapter, the fortunes of the patriotic Rajputs remained in the ascendant, for in many a battle with the forces of the Empire, the unparalleled strategic gifts of Durga-Das invariably led to victory. Though Jhalore, Mairtea, Jodhpur, Ajmere, Sirohi and Sojut lay under the sway of veteran commanders sent from Delhi, yet the utmost these men could do was to keep a bare hold on their citadels, while outside their very gates hovered the Rajput horse, levying heavy toll on all agricultural crops and on every item of merchandise. Thousands of householders who showed their adherence to the Emperor either

openly or covertly had their property plundered, their homesteads demolished, and were themselves driven to take shelter inside the already overcrowded citadels. At length affairs took so serious a turn that all the commanders were forced to inform the Padishah that unless something was done to reinforce them immediately, they would have no alternative but to throw open their gates to the rebels. Aurangazebe set his wits to work for the hundredth time since Jaswant's death to bring about the subjugation of his indomitable foes. Even at such a crisis it does not appear to have struck him that a little unbending, a few concessions, a gesture or two displaying the human side of a mighty Emperor, would be like the waving of a magic wand over Rajwarra and would bind its high-minded sons to his throne with those golden bonds of loyalty and affection that are stronger than any fetters of steel. But, as the chronicles say, who can erase from the forehead of either individuals or nations that which has been written by the gods? Aurangazebe's thoughts centred once again on Prince Azim, whom he strengthened with fifty thousand veterans, mostly from the Deccan, and who had stern orders to crush "the Ophim-quaffers" at any cost.

When affairs stood thus, a singular combination of circumstances made the situation easier for both parties for the time being.

The reader has already heard how the affections of Prince Ajit were wound round the fairylike personality of Princess Roshinara, Akbar's daughter. At every

available opportunity, the Rahtore Prince did his utmost to obtain interviews with his beloved, and once, when the desultory wars of the times took Durga-Das and the Prince to Dhruva-nagar to repel a particularly threatening raid of the Imperialists, the General stayed on his estate for a few days to rest his men. The chance was too good to be neglected by the eager young lover, and unaware that his guardian kept a very close watch on his movements, he stole from his tent one night, having previously sent word to the Princess to meet him behind the fortress.

The young lady, having seen her mother fall fast asleep, took her confidential maid with her and slipped out by a low postern in the rear walls. Ajit was waiting there with a beating heart. Before the two could meet and exchange greetings, a low cry escaped from the maid, and the lovers, turning round in trepidation, beheld Durga-Das standing before them with Ram Singh Champawat slightly to the rear. There was an expression on the General's face which Ajit had never seen before. Sitting down quietly on a boulder beside them, he asked the two young people in level tones to place themselves on either side of him. Then he took the right hand of Ajit and placing it on the girl's trembling palm, he asked Ajit to call the Princess "Sister", and the latter to respond with the word "Brother". When they had done his bidding Durga said gently: "Prince, for nineteen years I have kept watch and ward not only over you but also over this maiden who was born into the

world the same year as you. And in all these long, long years my one dream has been to see you, Prince, grow into the noblest Aryan warrior our annals have known, and you, Princess, into an ideal Yavana lady sprung from the loins of dauntless conquerors, and meant one day to mate with one among them. God entrusted the two of you to me, both fatherless and surrounded by enemies. *He* is my sole witness whether I have done his bidding well or ill. What I wish to impress now on both of you is this: both of you are babes whom I helped to rear, and this sacred bond means, to me at least that you are brother and sister—in the sight of God. Apart from this, I, Durga-Das, who have never known what it is to break my bond, pledged my word to the unfortunate Prince Akbar, and to his sorrowing wife when he went away, that no harm should come to you, Princess, so long as you remained under my roof, and that in the fulness of time, I would send you back to the Emperor an untainted blossom of his house and race. I crave from no one his or her forced gratitude; I only wish to say that, having placed my difficulties before you, I leave it to you to follow the path of virtue and duty. I am confident that from this hour you two will consider that you are brother and sister as though you were born of one mother. Go back, my child, to your mother's side, and rest assured that my love for you will never know diminution."

While Durga was speaking, the Princess broke into a fit of quiet sobbing, and when the interview closed,

she spoke not a word, but, folding her palms together and bowing to the great hero, went back with her maid to her apartments. As for Prince Ajit, contending emotions agitated him, the dominant one being intense disappointment and bitter rage against the unbending Karnasuta chieftain. But the good sense of which he had plenty asserted its sway for the moment, and he turned and led the way, also in silence, back to the Camp.

The very next day Durga's anxious cogitations led him to take decisive steps to dispose of the problem. He sent his trusted *bhat* with an escort of three hundred warriors to carry a note to Prince Amara, saying that it was imperative that the Rana should immediately send the coconut to Prince Ajit on behalf of Princess Chandravati, the daughter of his uncle Gaja Simha. Durga assured Prince Amara that this time he would see that the coconut was accepted, and that Prince Ajit left for Udaipur to be married without any delay.

He next despatched Sangram Salumbra and Jaita Jodawat to the Imperial Court to intimate to Aurangazebe that if he would restore Jodhpur to Prince Ajit immediately and without conditions, Durga on his part would at once despatch Akbar's Sultani and her daughter with the honours due to them to the Padishah's camp. The writing of this note was extremely distasteful to Durga-Das; for he had hoped that Aurangazebe himself would come forward one day to suggest this arrangement, in which case the advance would not have been on his side and his pride would have been spared. But the

gloomy temper of Prince Ajit warned the hero against further delay if he wished to uphold to the last his plighted word and the unwritten laws of honour.

It was just when the Emperor, then camping in Agra, was about to give marching orders to Prince Azim that the two Rahtore envoys reached his presence, heralded by a flag of truce. The letter from Durga-Das containing the thrice-welcome information that he was prepared to give the Emperor's daughter-in-law and his grandchild into his care after all these years made him dizzy with happiness, and he issued instant orders to Prince Azim to change, not his destination but his mission, for he was now to go to Jodhpur not to attack Ajit, but to instal him on the throne of his fathers. He was to take only five thousand men with him. A *firman* was handed over to him to the effect that Prince Ajit, sole surviving heir of the late Rana Jaswant, was recognised thenceforth as the Ruler of Marwar. To Durga-Das, His Gracious Majesty was pleased to offer the *Hcft-Hazari* (i.e. command of seven thousand horse) and a *man-sab* carrying with it a revenue of ten lakhs of pagodas per annum. The Emperor instructed the envoys to ask their General to notify him beforehand when the Sultani might be expected to reach his presence, so that he might send the requisite guard of honour a few miles in advance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Marriage of Ajit.

While Prince Azim was marching in all haste to Jodhpur to instal Rana Ajit on the throne of Marwar, the Rahtores sent by Durga-Das to Mewar reached Udaipur in due course and presented his letter to Rana Amara. The Rana at once sent for his nobles, and asked them if they were of opinion that marital alliances could be entered into between the proud, unsullied Sessodias and the wayward Rahtores, who from the days of Humayun had intermarried with the Imperial Moghuls. "Bear in mind, ye pillars of Mewar!" said the Rana, "that this proposed alliance between our two Houses has been in the air for many years past, and that my revered father Maharana Jai Singh had approved of it fully. In his eyes, the heroic struggles of the Rahtores with the relentless Padishah had erased for all time the errors of the past, and, believing thus, you know how whole-heartedly he proffered his nation's aid to the high-souled Rahtores. I may also add for your information that Prince Ajit's mother on her deathbed enjoined me to ask Durga-Das to prevail on her son to take Chandravati to wife and thereby cause greater glory to accrue to the long-proscribed Jodawats. My mother and my uncle Gaj Singh are alike willing that the interdict of two hundred years should be set aside by the marriage of my cousin to Prince Ajit. What say you?"

The representatives of the sixteen premier clans of Mewar took some time to consult among themselves, and then they declared to their Rana that they were all of one mind in the matter, and that the coconut might be sent to the Jodha ruler.

Accordingly, on an auspicious day fixed by the *purohits* of both parties, the sacred coconut was sent to Ajit together with a preliminary present of two elephants richly caparisoned, and twelve mettlesome war-horses.

When the bride's party reached Jhalore, they heard the happy tidings that Prince Azim had arrived at Jodhpur with instructions to instal Ajit immediately on his ancestral *gadi*, and that the young Rajeshwar accompanied by Durga-Das and thirty-thousand jubilant Rahtores, was hastening towards the capital from Dhruva-nagar. Taking this as an omen for a happy future, the bridal envoys quickened their pace and reached Jodhnagar at the same time as the Rana with his large following. The success that had attended both his embassies gave the great Durga-Das profound satisfaction, but his foremost thought was one of relief that the time had come for him to send the Princess Roshinara back to her legitimate guardian as unsullied in reputation as when she came to his roof as a babe. Ajit's restoration to his throne did not deceive Durga, but he consoled himself with the reflection that even a temporary occupation of Jodhpur might so strengthen the Rajput cause that Aurangazebe would find it extremely hard to recapture the State from Ajit.

Prince Azim received the youthful head of the Rahtores graciously, and at a magnificent Durbar attended by all the eight Houses of Marwar he placed on the brows of the young Chieftain the long-withheld Crown of Marwar. He next summoned Durga-Das to his presence to receive at his hands the insignia of his new dignity. But the greatest *Virpurush* (hero) of his time in all Hindustan quietly declined the honour saying that rank and riches were of no use, to a humble citizen like himself and that the possession of Dhruva-nagar yielded him more than he could ever require in his life. In return for any favour he might have done the Emperor, he suggested that the latter might instead restore Jhalore, Mairtea, Pali and Sewanoh (which had then been torn apart from Jodhpur) to his newly-enthroned master. When this was carried to the ears of Aurangazebe, the Emperor, who was the embodiment of selfishness, could not but exclaim, "Ah," what selflessness, what loyalty, and what nobility! It is no wonder that the whole of Rajasthan loves him and obeys him so utterly! Would that I had under me a Sham Shere of this incomparable kind!"

We now return to the marriage of Ajit with Chandravathi. Giving up finally his hopes of ever making Roshinara his queen, he appreciated to the full the great moral advantages of an alliance with the illustrious Chohans of Mewar, and he set out in great state, for Udaipur a few days after his coronation, taking with him all those staunch comrades who for the last nineteen years had endured with him weal and woe as the Gods

might direct. Maharana Amara on his part ordered the further adornment of his already lovely capital on an unprecedented scale. The first wedding after two hundred years between the two proudest Houses in all Rajasthan, ought, he said, to be celebrated with a splendour hitherto unapproached. The Kalyan-Mantap of the gem-studded Marble Palace of the Surya-Kula-Simhas of Udaipur was decorated with a taste and a magnificence that Aurang himself might have envied. The whole city and its environs put on an air of gaiety and unalloyed happiness. The fierce, dark-browed veterans of a hundred wars forgot for a few days all their martial cares and abandoned themselves to the joys of the passing hour. Beautiful Rajputnis, damsels and matrons alike, bustled about their tasks as though the marriage were in their own families.

The day of the marriage was fast approaching, when Ajit, who had pitched his camp on the way to Udaipur on the banks of the lovely Rajasamudra, twenty-five miles from the capital, was walking one evening along with the two Keechee brothers on the bund of the lake. Mokund Singh observed, or rather thought aloud, that it seemed to him as though he had played pick-a-back with the child Ajit only a few days ago, and lo, that child Ajit had grown into a man, and this young man was about to take to himself a wife, whereas he, Mokund, had still not found a woman who would look at him though he was nearing his forty-fourth year.

“Why, you grumbler!” laughed Ajit. “Do you think I am to be deceived with tales like that? I know how well enough many offers you have had, and why you persist in waving them all aside! Rupmani is your lode-star, though the silly maid—why, she must be nearly twenty-five by now—has been putting you off year after year for reasons which I think are too lofty and unpractical. Now that she is with her father in the Palace at Udaipur, why don’t you see if you can prevail on her at last?”

Mokund winked at his brother Shiv Singh, and turning to Ajit, replied “Raj Bahadur, it ill becomes you to say that Rupmani’s reasons for putting off the marriage are too lofty. She has never made it a secret that she will wed no one until and unless her throneless Rana gets back his throne. Now that that Rana is safe on his *gadi*, he thinks more of his own marriage than of that of his humble followers.”

“I stand rebuked, Kaka,” rejoined Ajit. “Your Rana has indeed heard some such thing, and so he vows to you to-day that he will not enter into matrimony at Udaipur unless his beloved Kaka and Rupmani stand beside him ready also to enter the same state. Will that satisfy you?”

“Pardon me, Raj Bahadur,” laughed Mokund, “for not informing you of it earlier. Rupmani has of her own accord sent word to me, that the obstacle has been removed, and has suggested that we should be married on the same day as you, though not in the Palace”

“Oh, you plotters!” exclaimed Ajit. “I shall punish you both heavily for your intrigue behind my back. Your wedding shall be under the same roof as mine, and the same moment shall see both of us in the bonds of wedlock.”

The auspicious day of days arrived, and the preliminary ceremonies of a Rajput wedding began almost with the dawn. The gayest of these formalities was the duel of words between the men representing the bridegroom and the damsels defending the cause of the bride. The contest was in the shape of songs and counter-songs, and for this purpose, the men placed the groom in the centre, and pretended to rush towards the bride's people with a view to carrying her away by force. This intention was frustrated by the damsels who kept the bride in their midst and formed a determined ring round her.

THE DUEL.

Women :—

Marauders bold, O silly bees.

Go, hie you hence lest harm befall

Your reckless band! This lotus fair

For such as you is filled with gall.

Are there no other flowers in bloom

For you to steal their honey from?

If you persist, then know your fate—

Disgrace and bootless martyrdom!

Men :—

Shall Rajputs flee from Beauty's snares?
What coward's talk is this, fair dames?
For such a treasure we would cross
A barrier of leaping flames!

Her wondrous beauty lures us on;
Our lives we value not. Desire
For her hath made us scoff at fear,
Our warrior hearts are set on fire!

'Tis eve; the Moon is kind; the birds
Are singing gentle songs of love—
Why, then, 'tis time the brave should meet
The beauty coy in bower or grove!

So leave her free and go your ways;
O thoughtless fair! For never yet
Have dangers driven dauntless knights
From her on whom their hearts were set.

The women, laughing :—

Sabash! How valiant, how great;
But granted ye be doughty knights
In crimson fields, how will that prove
Ye are as great where *Manmath* fights!

Avaunt, you rogues! Have you no shame
To sport your tinselled rags before
Us girls and boast heroic deeds!
Avaunt, and cease your senseless roar!

Aye, fair beyond your dreams is she,
The lovely lotus we defend!
If such as ye approach her side,
Beneath our heels you meet your end!

To that the men, throwing away their bows, and brandishing their swords:—

Hush, hush, my dears! Your tongues run on
too fast:
Battle of every kind is as the breath
We draw. We fear not bearded Yavans grin,
Or winsome maids perverse; and as for Death,
He is too old a friend to frighten us.
'Tis better you should crush us 'neath your feet
Than Moslem cut us down. So leave her free,
Her whom we seek—beyond all sweet things
sweet!

The women, smiling archly, and looking at them with the corners of their eyes:—

We hold aloft the bow of glowing flowers,
And shoot from it the lightnings of our eyes;
These pierce and dart through even the stoutest heart,
And at our feet men fall with piteous cries.

What time a lovely woman throws her glance,
Surcharged with passion, on her boastful foe,
The loves that ever wait
Fly on the instant forth and bring him low.

Be not persuaded, doughty knights and bold,
 That flashing swords and senseless shouts and
hoarse,
 Can e'er subdue
 Our loving hearts and true,
 Love conquers all—e'en Gods on high—not Force.

The men, on hearing this, throw down their swords
 and with folded hands and submissive demeanour sing:—

We are beaten, vanquished, brought to our
knees, O Queen!
 Behold, with folded palms we sue at your feet;
 As gen'rous foes and fair,
 Spare us, and we will swear
 To guard till death your sacred cause and sweet.

After this, all of them mingle and sing the chorus:—

The Blessed Lord in whom Creation lives
 With grace extreme hath led us on our way;
 With joyous hearts then let us sing His praise,
 And ask His blessing on this wedding day.

Then the two streams mingled together, and advancing to the foot of the long dais set up under a gold-brocaded silken awning edged with costly pearls, men and women separated once again and stood behind their respective principals. The orthodox ceremonies then ran through their solemn course before the sacrificial *Homa*, and Ajit and Chandravathi on one side, and Mokund and the buxom Rupmani on the other side, were united to each other in bonds of holy wedlock to the strains of massed bands, priestly blessings, and women's songs of joy.

CHAPTER XXV.

Epilogue.

We leave here our hero Durga-Das in the plenitude of his fame. In all Aryavarta only two names shone in those days as stars of the first magnitude, those of Shivaji and Durga-Das. When men talked of these of an evening under the village *pippal*, they compared them with the immortals in Indian annals such as Bappa Rawul, Prithvi Raj the Chohan, Pratap and Sangram the Sessodia. In the case of Durga-Das, the admiration of all men was centred on his unparalleled devotion to his Royal masters, a devotion which scorned any other reward than the approbation of his conscience. As regards his achievements during a long life, Rajputs loved to dwell on his utter fearlessness in the face of danger, the astonishing purity of his private life, and his almost suicidal magnanimity towards a yielding or fallen foe.

Like Belisarius of Rome or Cardinal Wolsey of England, it was the tragedy of Durga's later life that he should be the victim of the ingratitude of the very man whom as a babe he took under his protection, and whom, twenty years later, he set upon the throne of his fathers, battling all the time against the mightiest despot in the World. But though we can well believe that the great hero himself would not utter a single word of reproach against his ungrateful ward, the powers that work out

the decrees of Eternal Justice exacted a terrible retribution of Ajit. In his forty-fifth year, when the whole of Hindustan trembled at his name, and there was not in the land a mightier influence for good or evil than his, Ajit was surprised in his bed and stabbed to the heart by his own beloved son, Bhakt Singh, at the instigation of his enemies.

By that time both Durga-Das and his trusted friend Madar yogi had left the earth on which they wrought so much good, and we are left to wonder what the great Rahtore would have done had he lived to hear of a crime fortunately so rare in the annals of Rajasthan.



